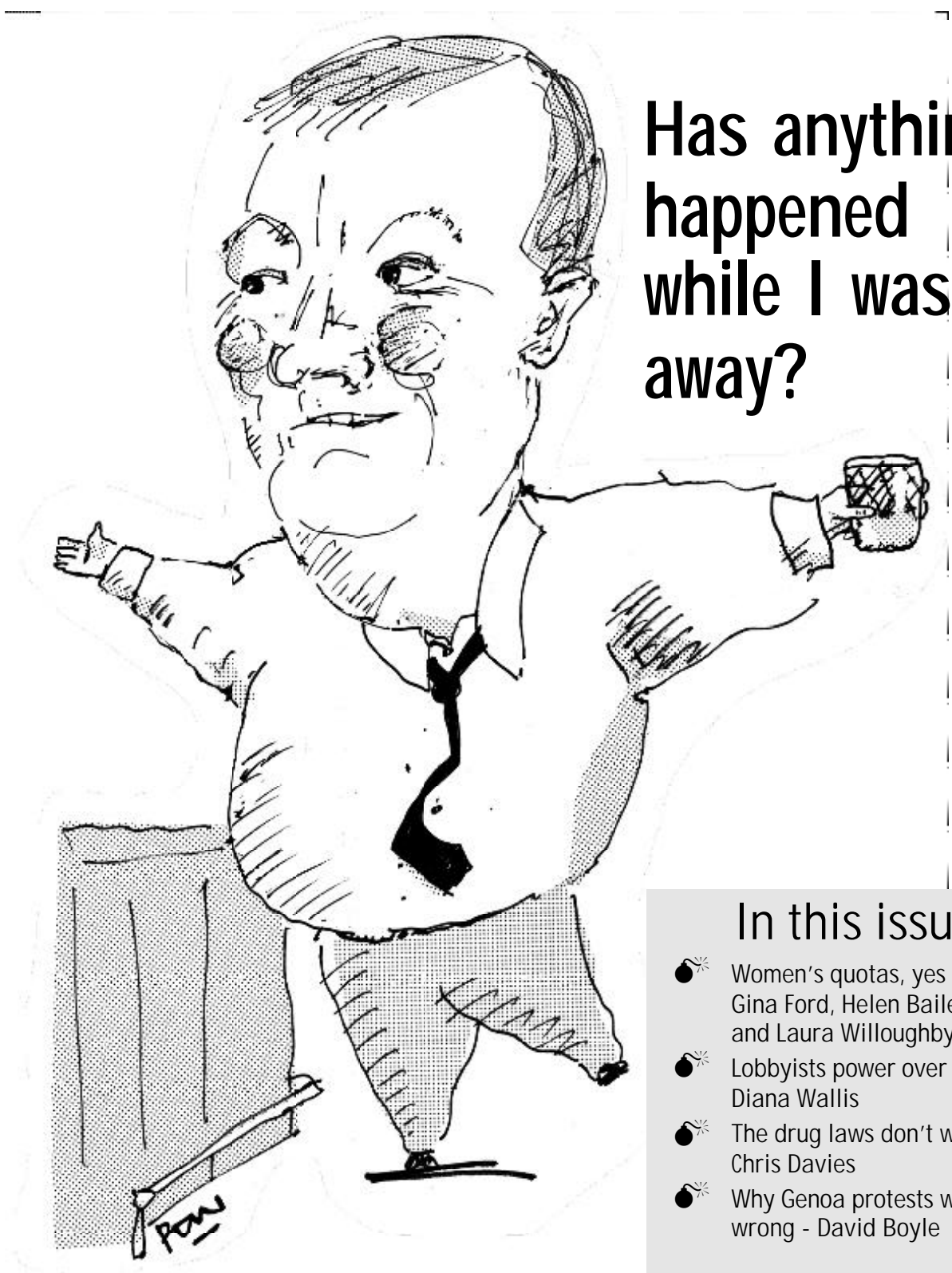


liberator



Has anything happened while I was away?

In this issue

- Women's quotas, yes or no? - Gina Ford, Helen Bailey and Laura Willoughby
- Lobbyists power over Europe - Diana Wallis
- The drug laws don't work - Chris Davies
- Why Genoa protests were wrong - David Boyle

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COMMENTARY

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

For years, politicians who wanted to sound virtuous have said that they want to concentrate on education and health. Suddenly, this fiction has become reality and the question of how public services are delivered has shot up the political agenda.

The mileage the Liberal Democrats have got from opposing the private finance initiative may surprise those who were around a decade ago. In those days, anyone suggesting that these services were best delivered by the public sector risked being dismissed as a “representative of producer interests” by Paddy Ashdown’s economic advisers.

If one wanted to be uncharitable, one could say the Liberal Democrats have swapped one bandwagon for another. More charitably, and more credibly, they have responded to changing times. The ‘fat cat’ scandals on the 1990s damaged public confidence in the private sector’s involvement in delivering public services. Railtrack and the train operators have now destroyed this utterly.

As long as rail privatisation continues unreformed, it will be politically impossible for anyone to increase the private sector’s role.

Liberal Democrats have argued that public provision is not a matter of dogma, and that service users do not care who or what delivers a service so long as it is available (though the party ought to have the honesty to recognise that this is in itself an ideological position).

It now seems this will not wash. Nor, presumably, will the idea that local authorities can simply award contracts then monitor service providers appeal much to voters. If all one’s local authority does is monitor contractors, why bother to vote?

There has been a shift in the past year which suggests the simple privatisation model of the past 20 years has run its course.

The Liberal Democrats have set up a body to develop policy on public services. This might allow the party to do some new thinking that will give it a more substantial policy than calls to spend more money, necessary though that may be.

But it should remember that “thinking the unthinkable” can no longer mean a mindless commitment to the private sector.

WHO’D WANT THE JOB?

The debate about the mechanics of increasing the proportion of female Liberal Democrat MPs has so far managed to miss a more fundamental point: what demands are made of candidates, male or female, and are these necessary and justified?

Liberal Democrat candidates in even vaguely winnable seats are expected to be a superhuman combination of policy expert, fund raiser, campaign organiser, media star, public presence, community pillar and party stalwart.

They are also expected to have the sort of dedication, or boredom threshold, that can sustain them through years of meetings, interviews, coffee mornings, jumble sales, canvassing, campaign planning and hand-shaking.

There are not many people who can do and be all these things, and particularly not when, to succeed, they will probably have to keep it up through two or three consecutive elections.

It is these sorts of demands that deter many, women and men, from putting the rest of their lives on hold while they try to win a seat. If the party’s organisation was such that the candidate’s multiple burdens could be shared more efficiently, there might be more volunteers.

Experience and common sense suggests that it is wise to get a PPC selected early for the longest possible run-in to an election. Those who want to use quotas to increase the numbers of female candidates have to avoid creating a system so complicated that by the time any women are selected it is too late for them to campaign effectively.

The hidden scandal of the 2001 election was the Liberal Democrats’ inability to operate their own approval and selection system. Seats were left to select late because, for example, the candidates committee had decided to make an ‘interviewing skills’ course compulsory but failed to ensure that it ran sufficiently often.

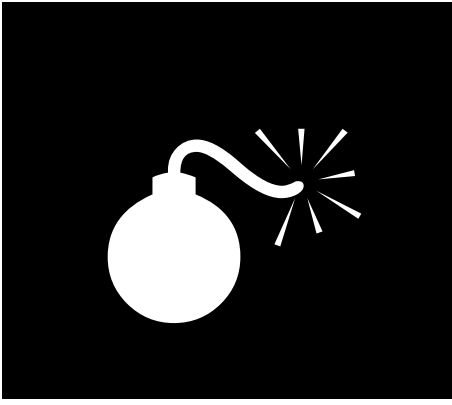
Others were left waiting because of the committee had constructed an elaborate interview system without troubling to ensure that it had enough interviewers to run it.

The party’s candidate selection and approval process has become an adventure playground for members who happen to work in personnel management.

These are political processes required to deliver an adequate number of suitable people as candidates in time for them to be able to lead effective campaigns.

Many supporters of quotas for women behave as if there were some large number of seats so certain to fall to the Liberal Democrats that the party can take as long as it pleases to choose candidates, and can disregard whether imposing, or deposing, a candidate would cause a damaging local split and resentment.

Above all, the party needs to reduce the burdens candidates of either sex are expected to carry. And it needs them in the field early.



RADICAL BULLETIN

LESS THAN INFORMED

The Liberal Democrats always make a great point at general elections of publishing the costings of their proposals, on the justified grounds that it would not be honest to ask the public to vote for something without saying what it would cost.

This admirable principle escaped the party in an article in the name of president Lord Dholakia in the party members' newsletter *Informed*, which dealt with the OMOV consultation.

This carried an introduction from Dholakia, plus statements for and against from, respectively, Lindsey Northover and Donnachadh McCarthy.

Surely the place to inform party members of the cost of the measures proposed was in the president's introduction, since this is exactly the sort of factual information on costs that the party feels bound to put before voters?

Instead it was left to McCarthy, in a piece that was obviously and intentionally partisan, to tell party members that they risked throwing away £90,000 on this idiocy.

Dholakia's piece did admit that in consultations held before *Informed* went out that "there was no significant support for OMOV for party committees", but some had felt it had merit for "federal and regional committees". The distinction between a "federal" and a "party" committee is so obscure that most readers must have been baffled.

But then since OMOV is essentially a scam by the party establishment to further entrench its own members in power, it was perhaps hardly surprising that they did not want Dholakia to spill the beans on how much money they intended to waste on this.

Another factor of which *Informed* readers were left uninformed was that the Liberal Democrats had just embarked on their customary post-election round of redundancies.

Money is too tight to continue to employ five staff members, but not it would seem so tight that a roughly similar sum could not be wasted on OMOV.

But this approach was at least in character with the rest of *Informed*. Members were 'informed' in breathless tones that "Liberal Democrat membership has risen by over 10 per cent since the beginning of the year". It does not say what this is 10 per cent of. Yorkshire and Humberside achieved the best performance with a rise of 15 per cent, but again readers were not 'informed' what this was 15 per cent of. The smallest rise was 7.5 per cent, but in that case readers were left in the dark not merely about the absolute figure but the name of the region concerned.

Elsewhere, part of the details of how to register for conference were printed in light blue on a dark green background, rendering them invisible to all but the most sharp eyed.

At the time of writing, the party had still not published the results of the consultation exercise. What were the turnout and votes? We think we should be told. But then perhaps there weren't any.

SUMMER HOLIDAY

It seems that Charles Kennedy's profile is now high enough that the press notice when he is absent. The Guardian wondered aloud what had become of the Lib Dem leader after a summer of almost total silence. This was taken up by Radio 4's *Today* programme.

Interestingly, the people attacking Kennedy for vanishing during the summer were 'project' supporters. This suggests that it is the remaining pro-Labour rump who are hostile to Kennedy, rather than the party's radicals; an ironic outcome given what appeared to be going in during the leadership election.

The Guardian improbably listed Tom Brake, Michael Moore, Mark Oaten and Evan Harris as 'rising stars' discomfited by Kennedy's silence.

Who could have briefed The Guardian to write this piece?

BALLOON DEBATE

Let it never be said that the Mitcham and Morden commemorative gold toilet is in any way sectarian. This autumn's award for the worst conference motion sees the Liberal Party flushed with success for the following:

"Airship development. Proposers note increase in air traffic and in pollution by the engines of heavier-than-air craft and call on the government to encourage the development of airships as an environmentally friendly means of delivering people and freight door-to-door and for patrol and disaster duties."

Using airships for door-to-door deliveries sounds almost certain to bring about a need for "disaster duties".

STAND ON YOUR OWN FEET

In among the usual thanks and congratulations, Brian Orrell pulled no punches in his final report as the Liberal Democrats' London region chair. He noted that at the next general election "all our MP seats would have to be self-sufficient...otherwise, we will

forever be going round in circles, fighting a defensive operation". Wise words indeed.

Sutton and Cheam, Carshalton and Wallington, and North Southwark and Bermondsey managed this feat this time. Kingston, defending a majority of 56, did have outside help, but was turning it away two weeks before the election as it became obvious that Ed Davey would hold the seat easily.

Alert readers will have spotted that this leaves Richmond Park and Twickenham. Despite having memberships among the largest and wealthiest in the country, these two were sucking in outside help right up to election day to the annoyance of regional officers. The effect of this arguably lost the Liberal Democrats Orpington, where the Tories clung on by just 269 votes.

Twickenham was not quite as bad as Richmond Park, where visiting helpers were astonished to be told the week before polling day that they were delivering the first leaflet received by some areas. Agent Jon Oakes, drafted in late from Kingston (in which borough a small part of the constituency lies), is said to have done wonders with what he found.

Next May, the Liberal Democrats must defend their 18-year reign at Richmond council. Gifts of wire brushes will surely be gratefully received.

TAYLOR'S TREAT

The newest Liberal Democrat MPs all received a strange invite to the restaurant in parliament's new Portcullis House building soon after the election. It sounded very nice – but left them mystified about their host – identified only by an indistinct scribble at the bottom of the letter.

But they turned up to see who wanted to buy them lunch - and to their surprise it was Matthew Taylor, who had also written to them all before polling day wishing them luck. Was Taylor trying to ingratiate himself with his new colleagues, most of who thought it a little premature for him to canvass support for a future leadership bid?

But their sense of shock increased as Taylor looked at the bill and then invited his "guests" to pay one seventh each.

GOING FOR THE BURNLEY

The Liberal Democrats may face a very awkward problem in Burnley come next May's elections.

Burnley was afflicted by the summer's racial tension and disturbances, as were many other industrial towns across north west England. But in Burnley the politics have the potential to get nasty.

The council is run by an old-style Labour group that has been in office for as long as most people can remember. The main opposition is the Independents, an organised group that stands under that label.

The Liberal Democrat group of nine has its own disagreements about the degree with which it should collaborate with the Independents. There are also three Tories.

The great fear is that the BNP could win council seats there next May, and that there might then be councillors in the various opposition groups willing to reach an accommodation with it to oust Labour.

Since the Liberal Democrat group could surely not work with the BNP (or with anyone who was willing to work with that party), they might face the unpalatable

alternative of, in effect, restoring to power a Labour group that had just been defeated.

Some of those with close knowledge of the political situation in the north-west are warning that the party should be keeping a sharp eye on Burnley.

THE DUSTBIN BECKONS

On very quiet summer news days, national newspapers have speculated that Charles Kennedy intends to pull the Liberal Democrats out of the joint cabinet committee with Labour.

Yet, at least as *Liberator* went to press, nothing had happened.

The JCC has been moribund ever since Paddy Ashdown's reign ended. Kennedy has let it be known that the committee has hardly ever met and has done nothing. So why not put it out of its misery?

Its current limbo satisfies neither the JCC's opponents nor its supporters. The former want it killed off, the latter want it to accomplish things. Even Tom McNally, possibly the foremost Lib-Lab flat earther, now wants the JCC to end because it has become a pointless source of controversy every time political collaboration is mentioned.

Kennedy may be saving up departure from the JCC for a dramatic gesture. His problem is that if he instead wanted it to resume activity that would in itself now constitute a dramatic gesture in the opposite direction.

In early September, a piece emerged in the press predicting a Blair/ Kennedy meeting to resolve the JCC's future. Kennedy must be hoping that he will have something to tell the conference - preferably that it is goodbye to the JCC.

BEING SELECTIVE

It was thoughtful of the Tories to stage a public entertainment on such a grand scale during the summer months with their leadership contest. Hardly a day went by without the nation being given some fresh upset to laugh over.

Whether the prize has gone to Ken Clarke or Iain Duncan Smith, and the result was not known as *Liberator* went to press, the Tories are surely in for a tough time. The former will cause a split over Europe and the latter over extremism. Both courses are likely to turn off further swathes of the Tories dwindling and dying support.

It is therefore quite likely that more Tories will be applying for Liberal Democrat membership, particularly if Duncan Smith wins.

The Liberal Democrats need to be wary of those who show no sign of any political conversion. Supporting the European Union does not necessarily make one a Liberal Democrat. Nor, for that matter, does a vague disposition towards 'moderation' do so either.

The Liberal Democrats have gained some valuable recruits from the Tories in recent years. But they should not take people jumping ship for reasons of political careerism, or those whose only real common ground with the party is over Europe. Above all, they should not accept sitting or former MPs where the local party concerned objects.

HAVE I JUST BEEN ZIPPED?

Gina Ford argues that “ever dottier” schemes to favour women in candidate selections are pointless, as it is the expectations the Liberal Democrats have of candidates and MPs that are the real turn off

There is no dispute that, despite vigorous attempts to promote women candidates, the number of women elected to our legislative assemblies is not in proportion to the total number of women in the population.

However, one can (and some of us do) also point out the lack of proportional representation of other ‘groups’ such as gays, those of non-white ethnic origin, or the less than able-bodied.

Why, then, do we as a party repeatedly build up a head of steam that fixes solely on ‘under-represented’ women and come up with ever dottier schemes to provide a shoo-in to winnable seats for those candidates blessed with the right chromosomes? I am sure I am not alone in finding it illiberal and unacceptable to introduce measures that favour women but blatantly discriminate against men.

There are many reasons why various individuals haven’t had the electoral success they deserve. Some of these are widely known to be the result of discrimination within our own membership, with cases of potentially excellent candidates disadvantaged simply because they were open about their sexuality or not born locally.

I have it on good authority that according to some of our members it is apparently especially dreadful to have been born in England and an affront that those of us so afflicted should even think about seeking selection for the Scottish Parliament.

Women have clearly suffered from similar prejudice - there is far too much anecdotal evidence of selection panels asking female would-be candidates how they would cope with their family commitments when the same panels have not thought it necessary to ask the same of the men they are interviewing. But is this worse than any of the other examples of prejudice?

In a recent *Liberal Democrat News* article Lesley Abdela asked if the Liberal Democrats are saying that there aren’t a couple of hundred women of ability in our party.

I don’t believe that this is the case, but I do wonder if we have that many women (or men) of ability who want to become an MP so much that they are willing to sacrifice everything else to make it happen and are prepared to uproot themselves and their families to a winnable seat and then continue to put their political career ahead of everything else to hold on to it.

Our expectations of those we have elected make it difficult, if not downright unacceptable, to many with children in school.

They can choose to have their family home and children’s school near enough to Parliament to have some chance of seeing them in the week, in which case their constituents may regard them as a part-timer with poor commitment to the constituency, or spend most of the week away from the family and become an absent parent for rather a lot of the time.

This and similar practical considerations are a significant deterrent to the participation of many would-be candidates. I suspect that this is one of the reasons that the number of able men or women who apply for approval or selection in the first place remains low, and the introduction of quotas for women in winnable seats will not make their choice any easier or more acceptable.

Within the next few months, here in Scotland, we are likely to be faced with the prospect of fixed or zipped regional lists and target seat selections to favour women candidates.

But there is no guarantee that this will deliver more elected women, especially if our activists are upset and alienated in the process.

However many hundreds of ‘wrongs’ there may have been over the years, if added together they still would not make a ‘right’ and we should not be accepting proposals that positively discriminate in favour of women before trying all possible alternatives.

If ever there was a case of ‘well I wouldn’t have started from here’ this is it.

WE CAN'T DO NOTHING

If there are no quotas for women candidates, the Liberal Democrats will be discussing under-representation decades from now, argues Helen Bailey and Laura Willoughby

Wake up Liberal Democrats – it is 2001! We should not be discussing fair representation again – surely? None of the women who first were able to vote in 1918 are still alive. Surely fair treatment is a nineteenth century and not a twenty-first century one.

Well it would be if we had not failed so comprehensively!

Failed? Well, let's not kid ourselves. Despite a membership that is 45 per cent female, only 33 per cent of our councillors are women. It would be fair to say this is a great achievement, but is still nowhere near representative. Fewer than 10 per cent of our parliamentary party are female – in fact the only place we do have fair representation is in Europe, and that was thanks to the zipping system – a quota system.

People tell us that the answer lies in community politics – but with under-representation even in local government it is clearly not the whole answer.

John Meadowcroft wrote in his latest study published in the *Local Government Studies Journal* that the under-representation of local councillors even shows that the “community ethos of the party has not succeeded in extending participation as an elected representative.” Even where we have been most successful, something has stopped us from being fully representative.

The quality and fairness of our representation should matter to us as Liberal Democrats and if it mattered – we would do something about it. We cannot leave these things to chance, or just hope that our party values will solve it in the end. And we cannot even hold our breath waiting for PR, some of us are suffocating already!

So the question is – should we do anything – and if we must do something, why must we resort to quotas?

The last election was a demonstration of failure. We failed to have anything like an appropriate number of women in target seats, and also far worse, where we had relatively “safe seats” - where existing MPs stood down - every one was fought and held by a man. Not only did this not help women – it also did nothing for other under-represented groups (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities or gay people) either.

This shocking reality alone disproves any notion that as we become more successful, we will become more representative.

Meanwhile, of those who won their seats for the first time to the surprise of many of us, and sometimes themselves, many were women. Perhaps this argues against those who say that women do not succeed

because they do not have guts (or balls!), are not sufficiently tenacious or well-trained and just lack the will to fight. We can and we do!

Perhaps too, please, we can nail the argument that training, mentoring, shadowing and support are what women need to help them in politics. Yes they do need it – but so do men. It is not the calibre or the training of our women that gets in the way. You don't need to be an academic high achiever, or possessed of outstanding wit or charm to make it in politics. Just watch the Parliamentary Channel! What we want is representative people.

Then there is the divide and rule argument – the one that says that we can't deal with the representation of women unless and at the same time, we sort out the representation of ethnic minorities and gay and disabled persons.

This, however well intentioned, plays straight into the hands of the right wingers, ensuring that nothing ever gets done at all. It is also the counsel of despair, the one that says it is not fair to research a cure for cancer unless at the same time we can solve AIDS, TB and variant CJD at the same time. We have to start somewhere – and without a start we cannot make progress.

At last we have a Government which recognises that it is important that women are represented in parliament – and which claims to be prepared to do something about it. Surely Liberal Democrats will seize the opportunity to redress the balance and overturn the injustice. More than 800 years of male only Government and 100 years of merely predominantly male government have left deep routed subconscious marks on our collective psyches.

Something has to change. If not this short term fix of rules and quotas – what are we going to do – Nothing? Is that really a viable option?

It is boring to be debating this again in 2001, but even if this motion is passed, it will take another three or four parliaments to make a real difference. We cannot be alone in fearing that the Lib Dem conference in 2031 may be discussing a similar motion – or fearing that we will by then be so outdated, un-credible and out of step that it will not be worth the effort.

GENOA RIOTERS GOT IT WRONG

David Boyle helped pioneer challenges to G8 summits, and he has tangled with the Italian police. But he was not cheering on the Genoa rioters

I might have given the Genoa protesters a quiet word of warning before they left, based on very personal experience. If you think the G8 leaders are brutal maniacs outside democratic control, you are probably right - but it's really nothing to your average big city Italian policeman.

It isn't so much that, as an associate at the New Economics Foundation, I've been involved in challenging the legitimacy of G8 economic summits for well over a decade.

It's that, almost exactly 23 years ago, I fell into the clutches of the Italian boys in blue myself - and only the unexpected death of a Pope rescued me from a long and equally brutal period behind bars.

It was a midnight stroll through Rome that caused the trouble. I was with two friends, one of them carrying a guitar - well, it was 1978: we did things like that in those days. Up ahead of us suddenly was a screaming melee of police cars and vans, a large posse of policemen and two hysterical American girls.

It's never a very good idea to intervene in these situations, and we had absolutely no intention of being heroic. But we had met the Americans only about 30 minutes before and liked them - and one of us insisted on a closer investigation.

It transpired later that the police had descended on the two lone females quite unexpectedly as they walked home to the youth hostel just a little ahead of us. But dashing in to rescue my curious friend, I found myself right in the heart of the melee.

One of the girls was being sexually assaulted by three policemen inside the car. Another was next to me, having her head smashed down on the ridge of the car roof by a burly policeman with an unpleasant moustache.

As she went cross-eyed, I told him to stop. When he carried on, I pushed him a little.

This had the desired effect, but unfortunately transferred the exclusive attention of the whole group to me. The policeman shoved his gun in my stomach, getting gun oil all over my hands. The others knocked me down on the road and gathered into a circle to kick me.

We were all taken to police headquarters, dashing through the night-time streets of Rome in a convoy with sirens blaring, as if we were the hottest of international criminals, rather than a handful of dazed British students.

My friend with the guitar came along for the ride - having nowhere else to go - and when the charges came to be doled out, he received the worst: insulting behaviour and armed assault on a policeman.

Charged with simple assault, I found myself on remand at Regina Coeli prison - only the Italians could possibly call a prison 'Queen of Heaven' - locked up for 23 hours a day in a small cell with eight homosexual Egyptian pickpockets, and a number of tourists with experiences similar to mine. It was a formative experience.

I was told to expect a two-year jail sentence, and tried piecing together a little Italian from the scraps of newspaper we were allowed, and sending messages out to the British embassy asking them for help.

To this day, most of the words of Italian I know have something to do with penitentiaries: magistrate, warder, handcuffs.

But three days later, it was the unexpected death of Pope Paul VI - this was the year of three popes - that led to a general amnesty for people like me, and I was released and thrown out of the country.

The American girls had been sprung almost immediately. Their fathers were US diplomats.

As a Liberal-inclined student, used to nodding my head sagely whenever anyone discussed police brutality, I found that coming face to face with the real thing was actually a terrible shock.

So reading the accounts of encounters with the police in Genoa, the beatings given to protesters and journalists alike, the pools of blood after a police raid on the anti-summit offices in the city, came as no surprise.

The New Economics Foundation pioneered the idea of on-the-spot challenges to the G7 - as it was then - back in 1984. We emerged out of the first of these events, The Other Economic Summit (TOES) in 1984, held alongside the London summit that year.

It was an intellectual affair, attracting radical economists, futurists and greens from all over the world. Something of the kind, challenging the right of the summits to speak for the people of the earth, has been held alongside nearly every year since then.

If you want to trace the lineage of the anti-globalisation movement, that was where it began.

It wasn't all tame. All the TOES organisers were arrested on the eve of the Munich summit in 1991. And if you look back at the radical new ideas of the original TOES – green taxation, ethical investment, alternative indicators – they are all now mainstream. All, in fact, Liberal Democrat policy.

The parallel People's Summits reached a crescendo in Birmingham in 1998, with the peaceful human chain of 70,000 people protesting against third world debt, organised by Jubilee 2000. It was moving and massively influential.

Given that background - of Queen of Heaven prison and TOES - I know I might once have been cheering on the protesters in Genoa. But I wasn't.

Ironically, the violence that have followed world summits since the police so over-reacted in Seattle in 1999 has put the G8 on the defensive in a way that 16 years of TOES never achieved. That's a serious condemnation of political cynicism.

But it has also entrenched attitudes and undermined the ability of the wider movement to put an alternative vision across.

As if globalisation can be reduced to a simple right or wrong. As if there was nothing particular the world leaders could do to create a just and sustainable economic system.

If the summit leaders lack any kind of democratic legitimacy, so do the rioters. The leaders certainly don't speak for me - or any of the people of those nations excluded from them. But neither do the people who beat up TV camera crews in the name of the excluded, or who smash up the premises of small businesses - wearing balaclavas and Nike sweatshirts - in London, Gothenburg and Genoa.

Nor is it good enough any more for the rest of us counter-summiters to dismiss the violence as just a minority - when we all know the minority will hitch themselves to any demonstrations we organise.

So Genoa leaves me with a feeling of exhausted rage. The smugness of the pampered politicians - G8 summits cost anything up to \$500 million a throw. The continued scandal of the Italian police. The rioters and

protesters who are delaying the moment when we call the world's leaders to account for the state of the planet.

As a graduate of Regina Coeli prison, I feel as suspicious as ever of unchecked state power. As a graduate of Earth and G8 summits over the past decade, I'm beginning to suspect we're missing the real challenge – whether the politicians are *able* to deliver on the greenhouse effect, or anything else.

Whether it is corporate power, or the sheer complexity of the modern world, if politicians no longer have the power to solve the problems ahead – we urgently need to work out what to do instead.

David Boyle is a senior associate at the New Economics Foundation, a member of the Federal Policy Committee, and the author of *The Tyranny of Numbers* (HarperCollins, £14.99/ www.tyrannyofnumbers.co.uk).

LEGALISE ALL DRUGS NOW

Chris Davies Liberal Democrat MEP for the North West argues that the Party needs to go beyond its call for a Royal Commission on drugs

“People like you are just as scummy as the criminals. You boys from college might be more refined but you’re still part of the industry of ruining people’s lives. In a sensible society, the criminals should be the ones who are worried.”

My views did not appeal to this letter writer from Oldham, a man plagued by local drug dealers and the criminality which accompanied their customers. And perhaps they will not be welcomed by some of my parliamentary colleagues. Seven years ago the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesman told the House of Commons: “The damage caused by drug misuse is massive and makes proposals for the general legalisation of drug possession appear unjustifiable and irresponsible.”

He was wrong. Not only have our drugs prohibition laws failed they have led to the unnecessary deaths of thousands of people. Meanwhile the criminality associated with the illegal drugs trade has flourished. The wealth generated by a global business worth £500 billion a year has given the drugs barons the power to corrupt and subvert, and while politicians keep their heads buried in the sand the criminals laugh all the way to the bank.

Initially I was a reluctant contributor to this debate. I do not want to encourage the use of any drug. But ten years ago I began to notice that senior law enforcement officers were querying the value and effectiveness of the drugs laws. At the 1994 Liberal Democrat conference I wondered aloud why, if cannabis had been good enough for Queen Victoria’s period pains, doctors could not give it to cancer patients. I backed the call for a Royal Commission to study the whole question, and I accused politicians of being out of touch and too frightened to stick our heads above the parapet.

“And with good reason,” I added, “because we risk being shot at. Rival politicians are all too ready to score cheap political points against any opponent who dares

to address this issue seriously.” They proved to be prophetic words. Within the year that gentle support for an exploratory Royal Commission had led the Labour Party to demonise me as the candidate who was ‘soft on drugs’ in the 1995 Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election.

Labour failed in its efforts and the Liberal Democrats won the by-election; since then the case in favour of cannabis decriminalisation has also been won in all but name. The Central Health Monitoring Unit, which

advises the Chief Medical Officer, has declared that “cannabis use does not register as statistically significant as a cause of death in this country,” which is as near as damn it to saying that cannabis does not kill anyone. The Lancet, which is written specifically for hospital doctors, has given a more cautious but very pragmatic judgement: “It would be reasonable to judge cannabis less of a threat to health than alcohol or tobacco,” it said in 1998. Opinion polls confirm that this view is widely shared by the public, and although the Government claims that it does not want to send out “the wrong signals” the Home Secretary’s endorsement of the decriminalisation trial by the Metropolitan Police in Lambeth indicates that it no longer is convinced by the case for the prosecution. I do not expect Labour’s moralistic ministers to

announce their conversion publicly, but I think we can assume that chief constables will before long be privately ‘advised’ that prosecuting people for cannabis possession is no longer regarded as a good use of limited public resources.

Liberal Democrats should now recognise that it is time to abandon the policies of prohibition in their entirety. More lives will be saved and crime will be reduced by adopting an approach based on legalisation, licensing, taxing and informing.



A fundamental liberal principle also needs to be defended: individuals should be free to do whatever they like with their own bodies so long as their actions cause no harm to anyone else. The role of the state should be limited in this respect to the provision of objective information so that free choice can be exercised. For this reason alone Liberal Democrats should always oppose laws which prohibit possession of any substance intended only for personal use. The issue of legalised supply is more complicated.

Most drugs can be injurious to health but a sense of perspective is long overdue. Tens of thousands of deaths annually can be attributed to excess consumption of alcohol either in a single evening or over a long period of time, yet alcohol continues to be legally enjoyed by the vast majority of adults. If heroin is illegal then logically alcohol should be illegal too. There are no plans to make it so.

By comparison to alcohol most illegal drugs appear intrinsically to be no more dangerous. Hospital patients do not avoid the use of morphine although it is a prescribed form of heroin.

The difference is that no-one buying drugs on the street can be sure of their level of purity or whether they contain adulterants like talcum powder, drain cleaner or powdered milk. In 1997 the deaths of 955 people were attributed to heroin (paracetamol killed 1,121 people in the same year).

Most were caused by an inadvertent overdose or blood poisoning rather than by the drug itself. How very much more dangerous alcohol would be if the off licence shelves were full of bottles with well known names but with no guarantee that their contents were what was claimed.

Imagine instead that you could walk into a licensed shop full of sealed plastic packets of various substances. Each would be accompanied by a description of the likely physical and mental effects of the product, details of its strength, a warning as to its addictive properties (if any), a guarantee that it had not been adulterated, and a strong reminder that to drive or work while still affected by the substance could result in prosecution as well as harm to others. Adults would at least then be in a position to make informed choices.

I still support the establishment of a Royal Commission but I now believe that its terms of reference should be very different. Accepting that prohibition has failed to meet the objectives desired, it should advise instead on the practicalities of legalising

the sale of drugs with a view to reducing harm and avoiding giving encouragement to their use. It will have many issues to resolve. Where should drugs be sold and what licensing restrictions would be required? What product authorisation procedures would manufacturers have to meet? Would advertising of any sort be allowed? What taxes would be levied?

There is one obvious starting point. Until 1964 it was entirely legal for an addict who needed heroin to register with a GP and receive free maintenance dosages plus syringes. They did not have to prostitute themselves or steal from the community to raise the money for their illegal purchases. Even more important they did not have to raise money by selling drugs, promoting their business by getting others addicted. We must break the link between the profit-motivated pushers and the addicts, and we can do that simply by turning back the clock.

WHOSE EUROPE?

The European Commission allows business lobbyists to overpower other voices, says Diana Wallis Liberal Democrat MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber

Europe has always been the defining political issue for me; not the in or out divide of the Tory party, but what kind of European Union do we want?

In 1989 I recall shouting myself hoarse over a loudspeaker to the unimpressed voters of North East Essex that we did not want a Europe for businessmen, bankers and bureaucrats, but a Europe for 'everyone'.

My first two years in the European Parliament have left me wondering how far away we still are from that ideal and more importantly how we change things at a time when voters are becoming increasingly frustrated with the abilities of elected politicians to deliver anything worthwhile.

This summer the European Commission has at last published its white paper on European Governance, which has been long heralded as the centrepiece of what should be a wide-ranging debate on 'how we "do" Europe' in the future.

Yet even the choice of the word 'governance' is itself worrying, as it has connotations of 'administration' or 'bureaucracy' rather than anything to do with inspiring political leadership.

It is as though there is a reticence to mention politics or indeed politicians. Indeed in the whole 35-page document, the European Parliament or MEPs get just two mentions! The principles of good governance are set out as – openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. But no mention of democracy even in the definitions of the above.

The white paper is not all bad news - as a starting point in a consultation process it offers a valuable opportunity - an opportunity for debate about the future shape and powers of Europe. Are we prepared to join in?

The Liberal Democrat MEPs have on at least three occasions (including the current conference) tabled motions on the future of Europe, which have not been selected for debate. The commission's consultation finishes next March, so that will probably be without contribution from our wider party. The debate we are having this time about the euro is welcome, but not if its terms of reference talk about benefits for business and cheap cars for consumers. Of course these matters are all well and good, but will Europe's citizens and its politicians be in control or will it be bankers and multi-national corporations who call the shots? We need to talk politics about how Europe functions, not just economics.

A good way to observe how Europe works, and who has influence, is to consider the legislative process and the work of lobbyists. If I had doubts about the legislative powers of the EU institutions then the volume of mail, telephone calls and visits I receive from various business organisations was enough to convince me that I must be involved in something of importance.

One of the most lobbied pieces of legislation in this mandate was the second reading of the Copyright Directive. This potentially harmonising piece of legislation set out to unlock the potential of the information society across Europe.

Of course it also raised the rights of authors and artists (and the music companies) over proper recompense for their work. The lobby from the music industry was unremitting; goodness knows how many concerts The Corrs gave in the Parliament and was it any coincidence that I was invited to the Brit Awards last year but not this year? People stalked the corridors with free CDs and lobbyists would turn up at dinner or lunch meetings on completely different subjects to catch your attention across the table.

However in this case, for once, the business lobby met its match. Librarians and academics, those most concerned about copying rights for research, are highly competent at e-mail. For once we had a more equal battle on our hands. I reckon I had several e-mails from every librarian in the country and I had already made it clear that our group was on their side.

There were days when we thought of disconnecting the computer. This is the exception rather than the rule and normally citizens will find the legislative process confusing, lacking in transparency and difficult to access. Probably the only organised body lobbying on behalf of citizens is the consumers grouping, but despite doing a good job, they are one against many and represent only one facet of the citizens concerns.

In general, the non-governmental groups are not as nearly well resourced or responsive as are those representing business. In some instances even my quite explicit communication with such pressure groups over an issue that I think might be of interest to them has fallen on stony ground.

For example, I take a lot of interest in Arctic matters, and it came to my attention that President Bush was about to allow oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

I thought it might be appropriate for the issue to be raised as an urgency motion at a plenary session in Strasbourg where it could be debated and, hopefully, condemned.

My staff researched the topic thoroughly and came across several groups actively campaigning against opening the wildlife refuge to the oil companies.

Despite numerous emails and telephone calls to many of these including Greenpeace and the Alaskan Wildlife League nobody responded. While this episode is not necessarily typical it confirms the imbalance which exists when it comes to lobbying power.

Into this forum, where there is currently such a vast inequality of arms, the commission now wishes to suggest that the legislative way of the future is so-called co-regulation; it sounds friendly but just what does it mean for parliament and those we seek to represent?

The commission envisages a two-tier approach: primary legislation - that is regulations and framework directives for council and parliament - but then secondary implementing legislation - left to the commission to fill in the so-called technical gaps.

Over the years, parliament has gradually managed to increase its powers and therefore the democratic accountability of Europe and now before our very eyes the goalposts are about to be moved.

The commission states that 'co-regulation is only suited to cases where fundamental rights or major political choices are not called into question.' Earlier this year by way of co-regulation the commission set up two Europe-wide Alternative Dispute Resolution Networks.

The first in the financial sector called FIN-NET was not even referred to the parliament; the second came to the parliament by way of an own-initiative report of which I was the author. This is mere comment and exhortation to the commission, not the same as legislation where we have powers of co-decision.

Alternative dispute resolution is an alternative to legal proceedings, and put bluntly what was being set up here is a replacement for the lower tier (or in terms of financial services not so lower) tier of our civil legal system and courts.

Try to tell me that that does not involve fundamental rights or major political choices. Indeed what could be more fundamental than access to justice? The institution that makes the choice about what comes to the parliament is the one that holds the power and the

commission is in that position and is entrenching itself even further.

Another example: we are considering a long overdue consolidating proposal on the rules of public procurement. I remember a meeting with the commissioner where he quietly mentioned that the so-called 'interpretative guidance', about the inclusion of environmental and social criteria, would be dealt with by the commission as a technical document outside of the proposal for a directive.

We have had to fight tooth and nail to get that guidance in front of the parliament, and yet it has been clear from the outset of the discussions that the inclusion of social and environmental criteria is in fact the most highly politicised of the issues associated with the directive; it should not and cannot be left to administrators.

It has to have a political steer; either price is everything, as the Tories argue, or other policy goals can be included. In an atmosphere where there is so much concern from citizens about the nature of the food we eat, can we really expect a local authority tender for catering to ignore the way food is produced and just base a decision on price alone?

It is high time for politicians to rediscover a leadership role in the face of administrative creep and market forces. Citizens and politicians should be joining forces to give democratic expression to fears about globalisation and the inadequacies of national government structures to deal with these problems.

We only have to note that the 100 largest multi-national corporations now control about 20 per cent of global foreign assets and that of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations.

Against this background I still believe that the European Union and its imperfect structures offers our citizens the best chance of a voice against corporate and other interests. But it will not do so if politicians and citizens alike try to depoliticise government; it's politics not governance of which we need more.

CONVERT OR AGREE

Mark Jones asks if the Liberal Democrats have abandoned Britain beyond their target seats?

FROM A CRITICAL FRIEND...

By the time this article finds its way into print the Lib Dem conference will have been and gone. After the self-congratulations (partially deserved), the complaints that “the media don’t report what’s really happening at conference”, gossip and massive consumption of alcohol delegates will return home invigorated for another year of campaigning. However after this year’s parade conference delegates at all levels will face some hard questions about the party’s future.

It still feels strange not to be a part of it. In conversation I still sometimes refer to “we” when talking about the Lib Dems. Not surprising as I spent 19 years as first a Liberal, and then a Lib Dem campaigner, until I left the party in February 2000 finding a new political home in Plaid Cymru shortly afterwards.

I view the Lib Dems as like an old friend or family member who I care about enough to get angry with from time to time. Not because I dislike them but because they need a critical friend to point out some home truths, nearly always the hardest part of friendship.

So let us start with the general election. It would be churlish not to congratulate the party on its successes at the general election. Avoiding a disaster would have been a limited success so to increase the vote share, gain seats and defend seats where long term popular MPs were standing down is indeed a huge success. Congratulations should be split evenly between Charles Kennedy and the campaign department led by Lord Rennard.

However when one looks in more detail at the campaign, the result and the state of the party all is not as well as first appears. Faced with a potential rout (as was a clear possibility in the aftermath of the leadership election) it clearly made sense to target hard, as in 1997, both in terms of resources and policies. I am prepared to accept that in the two years available prior to the general election there was little time to win the argument for traditional Liberal/Lib Dem policies of the reform of government and the political process. These are after all “big ideas” ill suited as one of “three things to remember” on a Focus leaflet.

This is unfortunate as the argument might have found some resonance with a disillusioned electorate if an effective means of communication could have been found.

The question for Lib Dems is, do they want to abandon the politics of conversion: (eg persuading the electorate to vote for ideas they do not initially support) for the politics of agreement (e.g. finding out what the

electorate says it wants then telling them repeatedly that you agree with them). This is an issue that confronts every party in the western democracies with New Labour being the epitome of the politics of agreement. The irony of the politics of agreement is that the voters do not seem to like it and stay away from the polling stations in record numbers.

The last election campaign was a clear victory for the “agreer” element within the party led for pragmatic reasons by the campaign department. This led to the success of the campaign but presents serious dangers to the party at the same time. If you ask the electorate if they think more money should be spent on the NHS they will say “yes”, they may even agree to a tax rise to fund it. Deliver dozens of leaflets telling the voters you will “save the NHS” etc by pumping extra money in and it may yield a handful of seats.

The fact is though that the idea that a few extra quid (one billion, 2,3 ,4 etc) will solve the problems of the NHS is arrant non-sense. The NHS faces a series of problems and extra funding is possibly needed.

However the reality is that hospitals and doctors surgeries are packed full of patients suffering from illness which are the product of poverty.

I realise that the party is having some sort of “commission” to develop ideas about the future funding of public services. As East Midlands MEP Nick Clegg is heavily involved. I am sure there will at least be some intelligent suggestions coming forward, but the concern remains that the party is no longer willing to look seriously at the poverty issue.

At the 1997 election the party had a superb anti-poverty agenda. In 2001 the commitments in terms of spending this would have involved appeared to this interested outsider to have been switched to the NHS. Plainly it is easier to win seats like Guilford, Cheadle and other suburban seats on a “spend a bit more on the NHS” platform but it will not help the long term development of the party.

The party urgently needs to find a new generation of members and activists. Anyone who works in the public sector will tell you there is a huge potential vote in what for shorthand we will call the urban middle class. Many of these people are utterly disillusioned by New Labour and looking for a new home. They are looking for a party that can put together a coherent narrative explaining the need for a reform of government and a serious attack on poverty. If the party does put together such a narrative then half the battle is won.

However the half is much more difficult. There has to be a party for people to join. In how many urban areas is there a functioning party?

In Leicester, the area I know best, there is a large group of councillors. However there is no local party in reality. Nothing for non-councillors to get involved in. The group gets little or no press coverage despite a supportive local paper, what little campaigning is done concentrates on entirely parochial matters at the expense of more serious issues.

When the local textile industry collapsed (causing massive job losses in Lib Dem held wards) MEP Nick Clegg organised a petition based campaign for extra regeneration resources.

The councillors took no part in the campaign (or if they did neglected to tell anyone) nothing in Focus leaflets, no council resolutions etc.

At the general election the councillors did little or nothing. One seat which had 10 councillors out of 18 compared to 5 in 1997 did less than at the 1997 election and increased its vote share by less than the regional and national average.

Sadly this is not untypical of non-target constituencies. In the short term interests of survival it makes sense to ignore the collapse of the party outside the "targets" but for the long term it presents serious problems. Given the non-political (and all too frequently illiberal) nature of many Lib Dem councillors and council groups developing a party that could create a serious challenge to Labour looks a difficult task. My suspicion remains that the party leadership (in the broadest sense) and party HQ in particular have little serious interest in building the party in urban areas. Liverpool, Sheffield and Islington were all won despite rather than because of party strategy. In 1998 and 99 when hard decisions had to be made about the use of the leader's time the leader was sent to obscure district councils where the party was defending seats against the Tories, at the expense of urban areas where the party was making gains against Labour.

Which brings us to another thorny question. Why did the Lib Dems give Labour such an easy ride in the second half of the parliament? Lib Dems are savage on the Tories but quiet on Labour. One clear example is on the issue of race. After the riots in northern cities the party deputy leader blamed William Hague for the riots because of his intemperate language. No mention was made of poverty, the failure of urban regeneration the lack of leadership and pandering to racism of the Labour government. At least two party members told me that there would have been no riots but for Hague's

comments, seemingly echoing the deputy leader. Frankly the only term I can find for this is complete bollocks. But if it is the case why have there been no riots after Labour MP Anne Cryers even more inflammatory remarks and more importantly why was she not attacked in the same terms? Is it not rather hypocritical to attack the most recent Tory leader for "racist terminology" after accepting into membership people prepared to be elected on the back of Mrs Thatcher's racist comments (made on national radio in 1979 and repeatedly endlessly) about Leicester being "swamped"?

The potential for the Lib Dems remains enormous. The question is has the party got the character to pursue a difficult but ultimately rewarding path. Will it restore the anti-poverty, and reform of government to the heart of its programme. Will it compel the campaign department to turn its considerable talents to the politics of conversion and away from the politics of agreement? Will it make the restoration of active local parties with a clear political purpose a priority? When hard decisions have to be made will it disappoint the activists in Little Nowhere as opposed to the activists in Big City?

Difficult issues to consider on your Focus round. Have you got the courage to rise to them?

LIFE THERE YET

Stewart Rayment assesses the Liberal Party election performance, and suggests it may be worth one more heave to heal the splits of the merger

The combination of a general election and local elections on the same day did not bode well for smaller parties, the Liberal Democrats included, still less, the Liberal Party.

At the Parliamentary level, the Liberal Party has not been represented since 1988, when all of its MPs joined the Liberal Democrats. This time, it contested 14 seats (the lowest ever) and Steve Radford, in Liverpool West Derby, saved his deposit. He dramatically came second, relegating the Lib Dems to third place.

Steve is an extremely hard working local councillor, and West Derby was not the Lib Dems target seat in Liverpool; those were Wavertree and Garston. This is not to say that the Lib Dems didn't fight hard for that second place. Liberal politics remain fraught in Liverpool. I am uncertain as to whether they can be unravelled.

Steve's 14.89 per cent of the vote is still along way behind Labour's 66.18 per cent (Lib Dem 10.89 per cent, Tory 8.04 per cent) but he told me that second place was his target for this general election, having held his deposit there in 1997. He has done it and one cannot deny his drive and energy.

Elsewhere, David Morrish came close to holding his deposit in Exeter (4.93 per cent) and Phil Burke took 2.63 per cent at Heywood and Middleton, as *Liberal News* put it

'demonstrating that it's possible to notch up a decent tally of votes forgoing an expensive freepost election address in favour of four year's networking, press releases and letters to the local press.' Good luck to him.

It is often argued that the Liberal Party are wreckers in the face of the Liberal Democrats. They are in fact a separate party which despite the urgings of *Liberator* successive Lib Dem leaders have done nothing to try to recruit, while showing considerable enthusiasm for former Owenite Social Democrats.

Of the 14 seats that the Liberal Party contested, all with the possible exception of Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale have been long-standing centres of Liberal Party activity. Despite small votes, many of their candidates are well-known local figures, and it is unlikely that all voters confused them for the Lib Dem candidate.

The Welsh Liberal Party's Rif Winfield, standing in Beckenham, significantly got their lowest vote (0.51 per cent - Lib Dem 16.04 per cent).

The Welsh Liberal Party ostensibly has a pact with Plaid Cymru, whom they regard as 'a good liberal party' whereby they do not contest seats fought by Plaid in Wales so long as Plaid does not contest seats elsewhere fought by the Liberal Party. This is a sophistry and they

know it; the days when Plaid Cymru might be regarded as 'a good liberal party' are long past.

However the Liberal Party is a threat to the Lib Dems. In Somerton and Frome

David Heath hung on by 368 votes, Jean Pollock got 354 (0.67 per cent) - they may not have all gone to David, but it was a close call. Back to your roots in this Parliament I think, Mr Heath.

Dave Green polled 767 (1.86 per cent) at Southport - almost certainly a low-keyed campaign allowing the Lib Dems to hold on to Ronnie Fearn's seat comfortably (43.77 per cent). But what might have happened in the face of a resurgent Tory Party? The Lib Dems missed Eastbourne by a wider margin - 2,154 votes. Theresia Williamson, who I think has fought the seat at every election since and including the Flying Bellotti Brothers by-election victory, polled 574 (1.28 per cent). Could a united front have advanced the cause?

Elsewhere the Liberal Party aided the election of Dr Richard Taylor in Kidderminster. Having decided to back the independent Health Concern candidate, Fran Oborski tried to persuade the Lib Dems (successfully) and the Tories to do the same. The knock on effect was that the hospital group did not oppose the Oborskis in their county council campaigns; Mike Oborski held his seat, St.Chad with 2,629 votes (67.5 per cent, a typical result) and Fran won Hurcott from Labour with 2,204 - a majority of 1,086 (55 per cent).

However both of these victories are down to hard, on-going campaigning which has led to a breakout from a traditionally held area. Mike Oborski is leader of the council in Wyre Forest, and on the same night Cllr Rachel Lewis joined the Liberal Party from the hospital group, giving them four councillors, as many as the Lib Dems. Notably the Lib Dems contested neither St.Chad nor Hurcott, nor those in Peterborough, where there is a local agreement, or Slough, where I presume there is too.

Chris Rennard would probably shrug and say this is small beer. Indeed it is, and it doesn't gain much of a head when you add local election results to it. Predictably, the real centre of Liberal Party support, Devon and Cornwall, provides something of an exception. The Morrishs held their county seats comfortably in Exeter; the Labour Party that has done so much to destroy the town a long way behind them and the Lib Dems taking around 300 votes in each seat.

A member of the Tibet Society of the UK once described David and Joan as the only true Liberals on Exeter council and possibly the only councillors who really care for the town.

SING LIKE LORD BONKERS

In Cornwall another good Liberal, Paul Holmes, held his county seat of Illogan North from the Lib Dems by one vote (964/963), though this has been subject to legal challenge. Paul took 1.39 per cent in Falmouth and Camborne, where the

Lib Dems slid back (24.46 per cent) as Labour consolidated (39.58 per cent - Tory 29.91 per cent). An apparent split in Cornish Liberalism can hardly have helped.

Elsewhere in Cornwall, Camborne North - the Lib Dems 83 votes behind Labour, Liberal 105. Redruth South, Lib Dems 35 votes behind Labour, Liberal 51.

Devon illustrates this further. Crediton Rural - Lib Dem 148 behind the Tories, Liberal 197. At Tavistock - Lib Dems 50 ahead of the Tories, Liberal 358; a larger margin over Labour at Clyst Valley (+ 421, Liberal 249). Rougemont and St.Leonard's Lib Dems 256 behind the Tories, Liberal 136.

In the past splits within the Liberal family have bedevilled our electoral chances. Splits within Liberal groups on councils are disastrous, as Simon Hughes knows well, Southwark having always evaded us locally.

At local level there is much evidence of the two parties working together. On policies there is little between them - perhaps the Liberal Party has thought a little more on the short-comings of the European Union, perhaps the Liberal Democrats don't think of them enough, but most of the above named are on the Liberal Party's pro-Europe wing. I think it is time that somebody, a lot of people probably, showed some magnanimity on this issue - that is all the protagonists on either side.

The Liberal Democrats are principally a Liberal party, the largest core of its members come from that background, even if Social Democrats wield undue power relative to their numbers. The Liberal Party has a small but in many cases dynamic membership that might thrive better in the larger organisation.

Ashdown ignored the issue, ultimately to his loss. It is high time senior figures in both parties got round a table to find out just how much they've actually got in common with each other.



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VOUCHER VICTIMS

This article appeared in the South London Press after Donnachadh McCarthy contacted them about volunteering to live as an asylum seeker for a day

The experiences that I endured that day and the eloquent testimony of the two asylum seekers that I introduced to the journalists, graphically illustrate for me why I am a liberal and not a member of New Labour.

Lord Dholakia kindly quoted from this article when pressing the Government for action on abandoning their pernicious approach to refugee human rights in this country during the recent debate in the House of Lords on the Queens Speech. I would like to thank the South London Press and reporter Hannah Goff.

"Life on vouchers is no bed of roses - as prospective MP Donnachadh McCarthy found out this week. He spent the day as an asylum seeker in Brixton, after exchanging some cash for the vouchers in a secret meeting at a south London train station.

Braving staring eyes, he attempted to buy a cold remedy in Boots on Brixton Road with the voucher. Handing it over to the cashier, he mumbled in broken English: "*Do you take?*"

The cashier took the £5 voucher and looked at it close up, then studied her customer. After a tense pause, she walked to the back of the shop to consult a superior. He took one look at the voucher, rolled his eyes, cocked his head to one side and indicated that they were not valid at the major high street store.

Our pseudo-asylum seeker received his moribund currency back and left the store in full view of a host of staring eyes.

Next he tried to buy a Tube ticket. Again, after a few puzzled looks, access was denied. Taking a bus - the same. So on to Sainsbury's Local for a spot of shopping. Walking around the store, he picks up a few essential items that this slimmest of budgets allows and brings them to the till. But this time a sympathetic cashier smiles and informs our "bogus" asylum seeker that he cannot give him any change from the £5 voucher.

So as a queue begins to gather, he has to rush back around the shop and get a few extra items. Even so, he only makes it up to £4 in total with a few pieces of fruit which have to be weighed and priced at the till, losing him £1 of his precious £36 weekly budget.

"*It was a humbling experience,*" says Liberal Democrat Mr McCarthy. Explaining his reason for living on vouchers for a day, he says, "*I wanted to use my candidacy in Camberwell and Peckham to redress some of the balance and show the inhuman conditions that people are being forced to live under.*"

"*What I have demonstrated by going into these shops and trying to use the vouchers is that we are not treating them in a humane way. It is as if the person has a neon light over their head saying 'I am an*

asylum seeker'. And these are people who are deeply traumatised, having fled for their lives in many cases."

They came to this country escaping oppression and torture but as asylum seekers in Britain they are not allowed to exercise some of their most basic human rights. And yet they are viewed by many south Londoners as con-artists living it up at the expense of the taxpayer.

But a quick look inside the office where Tunisian born Sami Masmoudi secretly sleeps on a pull-out sofa blows that image all the way back to North Africa. The room has none of the comforts of home. At night he locks the door and uses a lamp with a low wattage bulb to avoid attracting attention. Sometimes if he needs the toilet, he holds it until morning in case he is caught somewhere where he should not be.

The fully trained teacher came to England several months ago after he was tortured and blacklisted from working by the quasi-military dictatorship that is the Tunisian government for being a union activist.

Sami has been forced to stay in the office clandestinely, while he waits for his claim to be determined, because after three months finding his feet in the Stockwell area, he was told by the Home Office he was to be "dispersed" to Yorkshire.

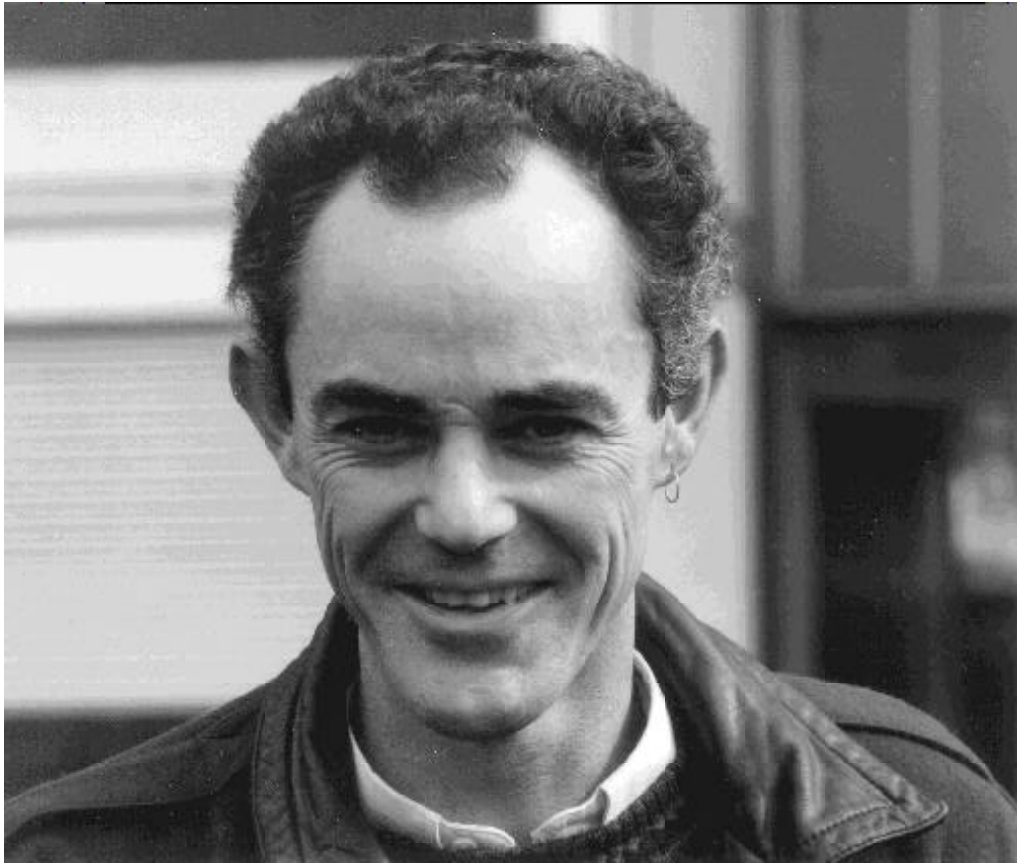
But Sami did not want to go. He had made friends and found a computer training course provided free by a charity. And in any case, the Home Office had told him he would be moved within days of his arrival, not months.

Because he did not go, Sami has now fallen out of the asylum system. This means he receives no state assistance in the form of vouchers, £36.54 worth of which are given weekly to compliant, single asylum seekers.

Instead, he gets by on the generosity of his new friends. He gets a voucher here, a few friends there. Like all asylum seekers, Sami is not allowed to work, or study, contrary to Articles 23 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drawn up in 1948 to ensure that the Holocaust could never happen again.

He was given no money or vouchers when he first arrived. He simply lived on the slop that the hotel (his Home Office emergency accommodation) served him as meals three times a day. He was happy enough, missing his family terribly, and he was safe.

But he was bored. He says, "*I couldn't do anything. I spent month upon month doing nothing. I just walked around. One time I heard there were some Tunisian people living in Edgware, so I walked there. I had no money for the bus, no money for anything. It took hours.*"



Sami recalls with shame how he had become thirsty during this 15-20 mile walk and nearly succumbed to the temptation to steal a drink. But he remembered himself and left before committing the crime. Several weeks into his stay, Sami himself was the victim of a crime, a racial attack. As he and another asylum seeker took a short cut through an estate, they were set upon by a group of boys who demanded to know where they were from. They beat them up and took their few possessions.

Sami says: *"I left Tunisia because I had no human rights - but now it is still the same problem. It is better here, yes. But I am not free."*

This is how fellow asylum seeker Khasha Yar views the voucher system on which he is forced to survive, if he is to stay within the law. The formerly wealthy Iranian poet and lecturer, who fled persecution and imprisonment from the Islamic fundamentalist regime which recently executed 80 poets, says he is "shy" of using the vouchers in the shops.

He says the faces of those serving him change as he hands over the coded piece of paper. They mark him out as different, as an asylum seeker. Although he is grateful for the assistance from the British people and its Government, using vouchers - so clearly different from everybody else's currency - makes him feel inhuman.

He says: *"When I was in Iran I was imprisoned many times. I used to think Iran itself was a prison. Now I am here, I think the whole world is a prison, only it is legal. It is a better prison - I have smelt freedom here. You cannot see the walls, the walls are behind the trees. But it is still a prison. In my country I was fighting for precious things. But here I am fighting for survival. I am fighting to say I am human."*

EXPLODING THE MYTHS:

"They are taking our jobs..." - Asylum seekers are not allowed to work until they have been granted refugee status.

"They are taking our council houses.." - Asylum seekers have not been allowed to go on the council housing waiting list since April 2000.

"Asylum seekers are scroungers" - At first they get no money, then they get vouchers worth £36.54 for a single adult, £47.37 for a

couple. This is 70 per cent of the lowest social security benefit.

"Britain is a soft touch." - Britain has the tenth highest rate of asylum seekers per person out of 25 European countries. Germany took 1.8 million over the last decade, whilst Britain took only 300,000.

"They are all bogus" - A third of asylum seekers who applied in 2000 were given refugee status or exceptional leave to remain. Adjudicators held up one in five appeals the same year, although these were not necessarily on applications made in 2000. But successful appeals are not added to the official statistics.

- Asylum seekers are given 10 working days to fill in a 19 page document about their claim in English and secure a legal representative. Failure to submit within the deadline means automatic refusal. One-third of claims made in 2000 were rejected on this reason alone without being examined.
- 96 per cent of refugee/ asylum seeker organisations say the vouchers are not enough to live on.
- Membership of far right parties has grown as the asylum debate has raged.
- Accommodation is provided on a like-it-or-lump-it basis.

Donnachadh McCarthy contested Camberwell and Peckham for the Liberal Democrats at the general election.

INTERNET FORCE FOR FREEDOM

Trying to censor the internet is not only wrong but impossible, says Tom Chance

During the Kosovo conflict in 1999, a 16-year old ethnic Albanian girl, nicknamed "Adona", began an e-mail correspondence with a junior at Berkeley High School, in California. She wrote of Serbian forces holding her village to ransom, killing journalists and community leaders, raping women, and finally of her friends and family deserting the village.

Meanwhile a dissenting radio station, B92, was being given Internet access by the Dutch ethical Internet Service Provider (ISP) called XS4ALL, over which the journalists were able to send their usual transmissions via a proxy in Holland.

Seeing that their censorship methods were proving useless, and trying to appease foreign aggression, the government soon allowed B92 to resume its transmissions over radio.

Toward the end of the war, Witness.org trained four Kosovars to document human rights abuses on digital video, which were sent back to Witness.org via the Internet. These videos, along with the accounts of Adona and many others, are now being used as evidence in The Hague to put away Serbia's war leaders.

Because of the anarchistic, anonymous nature of the Internet, the Serbian authorities could do nothing to stop this flow of information between its citizens and the outside world, which meant that it could no longer censor all information.

This not only gave the people of Kosovo who had some access to these Internet organisations hope and a sense of purpose during the conflict, but helped the international community better to understand the circumstances in Kosovo during and after the conflict. Having the Internet was like having top secret agents all across Kosovo who would then report to the whole world, not just top intelligence organisations.

There are similar tales of people using the Internet to fight repression across the world, from the indigenous Zapatistas of Mexico to journalists in China and Tibet. This revolution is being fuelled by a growing number of groups dedicated to bring the power of the Internet to people fighting for freedom.

The most prominent perhaps is the Independent Media Centre, or Indymedia for short. They started up in 1999 in Seattle as a news service for protestors in the famous street battle, and have since spread across the world providing the technology and to some extent the funding to give people on the ground a voice without having to use the corrupt governmental and corporate media sources.

Meanwhile in Britain and other developed countries the story is completely different. The Internet is another

shopping channel, a great way to keep in touch with friends, and a dangerous source of information for children. There have been countless calls for increased regulation of the Internet, and more control for the government so that they can censor web sites and other information sources and keep a tab on what we in Britain can look at. These suggestions have been fuelled by a fear of paedophiles using the Internet (and more specifically Internet chat rooms) to lure children into their homes.

These suggestions of censorship are utterly absurd, not least because of the technical reasons that make it almost impossible. For the government could impose extremely tough censorship laws on ISPs, blocking dangerous people from the Internet. But then with half a brain they could connect anyway. All you need is a computer and a phone line.

And meanwhile this censorship would prevent the ordinary citizens in Britain from looking at a whole range of information that the government deem to be damaging. For example, last year the Home Office shut down a web site called www.new-labour.org, presumably because it was a satirical attack at New Labour's terrorism laws, which label any protestors as terrorists.

The censorship the government could then wield would spread, as other governments followed our lead and learn to better censor the Internet. Soon across the world this valuable media outlet, the bastion of liberal freedom, would be shut down for the ordinary citizen and subversive ideas would once again be suppressed. We would be forced back into the corporate media's lap, without a real voice for the people.

This level of censorship is unfortunately now being discussed by a large range of nations, under the title of The Hague Convention. They want to give governments the power to completely censor ISPs and information servers in any way they wish, just as they can with the more traditional media.

We, in the Western world, should have no need for this kind of censorship, and should see the massively damaging effects it will have on unstable and developing countries, to whom the Internet's freedom is a route to future political freedom. There must be a balance between interests.

The most absurd thing about the media's reaction to the Internet, which is really giving the government direction for legislation, is that they aren't using their common sense. For example, we teach our children not to talk to strangers in the street, lest they are paedophiles.

We also try to give our children a basic moral system, and teach them to discern between nonsense, such as racially motivated views, and good argument.

So why can we not teach our children to be careful about talking to strangers on the Internet, and to be careful about what they read on the Internet? And is it too much to ask that parents also use a bit of common sense and monitor what their children look at, using prevention software like Net Nanny if necessary? A bit of common sense could easily quash the dangers of the Internet for people, if not for our governments.

We should also see the positive social side of the Internet, shaking off misconceptions of unfriendly, isolated hackers, and realising the true social nature of the hackers that built the Internet. I should note at this point that in its original meaning a hacker is somebody who likes to play with computers and programs. The villains the media talk about are actually known as Crackers.

One can tell a group's character by their work, and the Internet is built around mutual co-operation, sharing and a strong sense of community. Instead of creating a network which they could profit from, hackers kept every detail of the network completely open and freely available, creating a set of standards that enabled it to grow and grow freely, both in the sense of cost and freedom.

Interestingly it is this freedom that has started to make companies who use the Internet quite uneasy, as they like to function in a very closed world keeping everything they do secret, and the idea of working in a truly open medium that doesn't lend itself to profit seems ludicrous. There have been heated debates on this subject on a favourite news discussion site called Slashdot.org, with business men posting articles arguing that the Internet should be superseded by a network that follows profit margins rather than technical limits and dreams. Hackers have countered with arguments claiming that the various freedoms given by the Internet make it superior to any corporate-driven network, and that such an anarchistic collective can in fact be extremely productive.

The leading light of the hackers' dream, and the justification of their arguments, is the Free Software Foundation, founded by Richard Stallman in 1984. This is a group of hackers who have created an entire Operating System (OS, like Microsoft Windows or Apple's MacOS) called GNU/Linux, and hundreds of programs to go with it. The OS is free to download, and you are free to copy, modify and then redistribute any of the code to anybody. The FSF epitomises this sense

of community and sharing, and is perhaps a leading light not only on the Internet, but also in a world where sharing and community seem to have lost out to profit and selfishness.

So rather than calling for increased censorship and more secure shopping web sites, maybe it is time we looked at the Internet as a force for freedom and social cohesion. We should not be lobbying our government to introduce laws like the Hague Convention, we should be lobbying them to introduce laws that ensure its political and social freedom, and that encourage its social values. Maybe then we will reap some real benefits from this much talked of but hugely misunderstood information resource.

ISRAEL SPEAKS

Eli Yerushalmi, minister-counsellor for public affairs, at the embassy of Israel, puts his country's case in the Middle East's current tensions

The past year has been most devastating for all those who believe in peace in the Middle East. Eight years after the Oslo Accords, amid a wave of Palestinian terror and violence, genuine peace and reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians seems further away than ever.

How did we get to this impasse when peace had seemed so close little more than a year ago?

Fundamentally, the Palestinians, Israel, and indeed, the entire world, have been let down by a failure of leadership on the part of the PLO. Last year at Camp David, Yasser Arafat well understood that the moment of truth had come, that the time for interim agreements was over and that painful decisions finally had to be made on both sides. He was unable to seize that opportunity.

The Israeli government, led by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, was ready to discuss an agreement that while securing Israel's vital interests, was far-reaching in its response to Palestinian needs. It provided for an independent, viable and contiguous Palestinian state beside Israel, which would have satisfied United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and an agreed resolution to the issues of Jerusalem, settlements and refugees that would meet both sides needs and sensitivities.

But Mr Arafat proved not to possess the foresight and courage of President Sadat of Egypt or King Hussein of Jordan, and he missed this opportunity to achieve peace and build a more prosperous future for his people.

Instead, the summit revealed the stark fact that he was not yet ready to end the conflict with Israel, preferring to hold on to negotiating positions such as the demand for an unqualified Palestinian "right of return", which would only ensure the perpetuation of the conflict rather than its resolution (a permanent Palestinian demographic claim on the State of Israel is hardly the stuff of reconciliation and mutual coexistence)!

Furthermore, Arafat proceeded to renege on the most basic understanding of the Oslo process: a commitment to abandon the resort to violence and to resolve the conflict through peaceful means.

The Palestinian leadership's decision to "ride the tiger" of popular Palestinian anger – a genuine anger no doubt, but one that has been nurtured and fostered through constant anti-Israel incitement in Palestinian schools and across the Palestinian media – has been repeated on a daily basis since the beginning of the crisis.

The popular nature of the so-called "uprising" has long ago ebbed, having been replaced by a campaign of calculated shooting and bombing of Israeli targets – most of them civilian. Every day choices have been

made by the Palestinian leadership whether to seek to bring this violence to an end or to persist with the strategy of forcing further Israeli concessions through violence and international intervention.

At its core, the Oslo process required both sides to engage in a process of self-reflection, and to grapple with the political, security and moral questions raised by the nature of its relationship with each other. The Israeli people have used the last decade to conduct a very public (and often very painful) discourse regarding the necessity of territorial compromise in order to bring about peace. The Israeli people recognize the need to address the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians in order to secure our own fundamental aspirations, of which genuine peace is a key element.

Unfortunately, this process of coming to terms with the price of peace has not been mirrored on the other side. The Palestinians have not been willing to consider the concessions needed to lead to reconciliation, and they have not yet made that same conceptual journey towards peace. Even after eight years the Palestinian leadership have still not educated their people toward acceptance of the State of Israel, and they have failed to readjust their sights from what may be ideal in their eyes to what is real and realistic. Much recent evidence points to the fact that Palestinian self-definition is still seemingly founded not only upon the denial of the legitimate right of the State of Israel to exist, but also upon its violent destruction.

Instead of peace, what we face at the moment is a situation of undeclared armed conflict. The PA continues to promote incitement and hatred against Jews. For the first time religious clergymen encourage suicide as a legitimate act of God. Official Palestinian television programmes glorify martyrdom in the struggle against Israel. Children are trained in the use of firearms in summer camps and in youth groups.

Furthermore, we know that the PA has been guiding terrorism activities and has turned a blind eye to terror attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Mr. Arafat still refuses to re-arrest dozens of terrorists whom he has released, including those suspected of the bomb in a Tel-Aviv disco which killed 21 teenagers. On numerous occasions Israel has asked the PA to prevent terrorism and to arrest suspected attackers, but these requests have been consistently ignored. All this must change if new talks are to have any point.

Such prospects, however, seem slim. Mr. Arafat has violated almost every agreement he has ever signed in both letter and law. The Oslo Accords assumed that the transfer of administrative responsibilities for the West Bank and Gaza would encourage his transformation from revolutionary into a leader of a viable nation state.

The failure of Mr. Arafat to live up to this challenge is the primary cause of our crisis today.

And it is this failure that the West must now address. It has been common practice for those who support peace to look to Israel for both the explanation of the failures of the peace effort and the answers for its correction. And, as a democracy committed to universal values of individual liberty and the rule of law, it is only correct that Israel is subject to constant scrutiny. But it is surely incumbent on all who care for peace to look at both sides if we are to find an equitable solution.

The international community must therefore insist that solemn agreements be upheld and that peace be nurtured in Palestinian society. It must be taught in schools, places of worship, the media and the family. Peace must be built from the ground up, and be based on a willingness of both peoples to accept each other.

More must be done to encourage the Palestinians to prepare their own society for a life beyond 'liberation', for the challenges of responsible government, and for the maturity of decision making where responsibility for your people's fate is yours, not that of some demonised oppressor.

Most importantly it must be emphasized that the issues between the sides (and it must not be forgotten, in all the desire to help the Palestinians, that Israel too

has legitimate concerns) must be addressed at the negotiating table, not through violence and terror. We recognize that the Palestinians people have a basic right to national self-determination, and deserve the opportunity to live in a democratic and viable country. We have absolutely no desire to control their lives or to dominate their land, and we have shown that we are ready to sit down and discuss all of their concerns.

However, we do have an obligation to ensure that their state does not come at the expense of our own legitimate right to exist in the region.

It is true that the future of the peace process is not bright now, and the Israeli public no longer trusts Mr. Arafat or the Palestinian leadership. Only a year ago, that leadership had a golden opportunity to establish their long-desired state in an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation, which they missed as a result of misguided considerations. Israel remains hopeful, however, that the Palestinian leadership will wake up and begin to act responsibly, in the genuine interests of their own people. The fate of all in the Middle East depends on it.

Liberator invited the Palestinian organisation in the UK to contribute an article but none was supplied.

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WHAT WORKS... WON'T WORK

The Blairite obsession with managerialism has reduced democracy to government by auto-pilot says Andrew Toyne

A few years ago, it would have been absurd to suggest that core public services should be contracted out to the private sector. Now, to oppose the idea that private firms should make profits at taxpayers' expense, at greater cost than direct public borrowing, and providing an inferior service to the public services they replaced (PFI hospitals are a case in point) is to be in favour of 'producer interests'.

What is all this reactionary nonsense about 'producer interests'? We all benefit from a productive economy, relying either on our own production or that of other people, so we all have 'producer interests' in one way or another. There is no evidence that public sector employees are any more greedy, corrupt, selfish or resistant to change than anyone else. If we are searching for scapegoats, we should look for these vices in all sectors of the economy. It is rather disingenuous for politicians of the Blairite consensus to claim that what they care about is "what works". Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown have both been saying that government should "steer more but row less", or commission rather than provide – so there is a definite ideological preference for private over public.

In a purely pragmatic study of "what works", how can we possibly say in advance of our conclusions, that government should do less? We might equally say that under-performing privatised services should be renationalised. Our enquiries may well conclude that government should do less, do about the same, or even do more. Blair and company have failed to follow their own rhetoric and show a curious blind spot to what does not work: Worcester PFI hospital, Carlisle PFI hospital, Railtrack, London Underground etc ad nauseum. In the debate over the public sector, we should also ask how we could achieve joined-up government. An example of this inter-agency approach is Charles Kennedy's proposal for tackling the long-term causes of ill health. For instance, the solution for someone suffering from chronic bronchitis and living in a damp home is to re-house them somewhere drier. How can this be achieved between private operators tied to a plethora of specific contracts, in this case, health care and housing? A housing contractor would argue that it should pursue only its contractual obligations; its priorities are to provide new homes to meet housing need. Renovating damp premises will be done when resources allow. Similarly, a health care contractor may continue prescribing antibiotics because this is cheaper; re-housing people is not in its remit. Public services cannot be simultaneously fragmented and joined-up any more than privatisation has given us

a joined-up railway. Strategic inter-agency concerns are also part of the question "what works?"

Paddy Ashdown, writing in *The Independent* on 13 June, believes that the Liberal Democrats are in "deadly danger" of being seen as too left wing, and that the question of ownership is "of interest only to ideologues". But surely one ideology worth defending is that of democratic control and accountability? We vote for a government; it sets public service priorities on our behalf, and takes responsibility for any failures. Or, we have more devolved structures, where local representatives sit on school governing bodies, health authorities or whatever. It is the view of us "ideologues" that important decisions are made in the ballot box, not in the boardroom. Utilitarian arguments about "what works" can be rather dangerous. The line that "people don't care much about who runs their services" could cut local democracy out of the equation altogether, or even democracy itself. "What works" in Fascist Italy was that the trains ran on time. Fascism is not on the agenda, but Blair utilitarianism reduces democracy to government by auto-pilot. There is no vision, no strategic overview, no concern for what is right. Only managerial efficiency, and a bias for the private sector because that is "inevitable". And here lies a possible cause for the low voter turnout. So many things are "inevitable" these days that it is surprising that anyone votes at all. The view that only the private sector has the answers is not a new one. Neither is it particularly radical, or for that matter, true. Liberal Democrats should of course seek solutions to the failings of public services (and one of them might indeed involve more money), but we should also seek to ensure that services are fully accountable to people and their elected representatives at a national level.

We should also ensure that they are "joined-up"; capable of co-ordinating within a strategic overview, a situation that is almost impossible in the private sector.

We should ensure that services are responsive to the needs of users, but not lose sight of the overall public interest. Consumerism is inappropriate for essential public services: having pushy parents does not constitute a special educational need. We should involve the private sector if that really will improve service, but not expose public services to corporate takeover. We should encourage investment, but not use that as public borrowing through the back door, or think that the answer to any failing service is to throw private money at it. And we should reject the reactionary view that the public sector is riddled with reds under the bed, or producers under the pillow.

PAPERS TIGERS NEED TEETH

Iain Sharpe argues that the Liberal Democrats should campaign to stop another Labour landslide

Charles Kennedy has made clear in numerous speeches and articles since the general election that the Liberal Democrats are to concentrate on providing a strong opposition to the Labour government during this parliament.

There is to be no repeat of the 'phoney war' of 1997–99 when the party repeatedly pulled its punches in the vain hope of winning the goodwill of Tony Blair on electoral reform.

Kennedy is to be congratulated on moving the party away from Lib-Labism without triggering another bout of navel gazing and internal strife. Although there has been no final decision on the Joint Cabinet Committee, its days definitely look numbered. So if we are now firmly in opposition to the government, what does that mean for our national electoral strategy? Should we now be committed to getting rid of Labour? After all, it would be an odd position to say we are opposed to the government but are happy to see it re-elected next time round.

Yet there is a view in the party, one associated particularly with Lord McNally, that seems to say just this. It counsels caution in our opposition to Labour.

Our main opponents are the Conservatives, this line of thinking runs, and we should concentrate on making sure that they do not return to power. While the Liberal Democrats should remain an independent party, they should know which side their bread is buttered on.

They should recognise that a Labour government is preferable to a Conservative one and we should not do anything that prejudices keeping the Conservatives out of power. We have a chance for a prolonged period of progressive government in Britain and we should play a constructive part in that rather than engaging in mindless tribal warfare. While we should oppose to Labour on specific issues and seek to influence government decisions, we should remember that in many ways Labour are our natural anti-Tory allies.

While accepting that there is a certain amount of truth in this – who in the Liberal Democrats really thinks the party should be neutral as between Labour and the Tories? – our role should be that of a genuine opposition party, not part of a mythical progressive alliance. While we are free to argue our case to the Labour government on any issues, there is no particular reason they should take any notice as long as they have a landslide majority in parliament. They can afford to ignore not only the opposition parties, but also any troublemakers in their own ranks. Labour is more likely to take notice of us if we are in a position to do them serious electoral damage.

Landslide majorities are something that Liberal Democrats should automatically be against. Governments with large majorities are apt to become arrogant and self-serving, particularly if the party in

power sees itself as the only possible government. The reason for the sleaze and pigheadedness of the previous Tory administration was not that Tories are uniquely awful, but that they had begun to think of themselves as invincible and irreplaceable.

If we were to declare that we want to prevent another landslide and if possible to bring about a balanced parliament it would not be an exercise in the kind of tribalism that often besets the left, but rather a matter of being cruel to be kind.

The broad progressive cause in Britain is best-served not by half-hearted opposition to Labour, but by giving Labour genuine reason to fear the rise of a real progressive alternative. At present Labour are able to occupy the centre-right of politics in a bid to prevent a Tory revival. They can afford to ignore electoral reform, to go slow on entry into the euro and to neglect public services. They are only likely to act differently if there is a serious challenge to Labour hegemony that does not come from the right. We have to be bold enough to say we don't want to see this present Labour government re-elected.

At this point many Liberator readers will no doubt be groaning that this means a return to the kind of speculation about hung parliaments that so damaged our campaigns in 1987 and 1992. But the problems in those elections came more from our own delusions of grandeur. In both elections we gave the impression of assuming that in a balanced parliament we would get to choose which of the other parties took power.

Rather than assuming to ourselves the role of kingmakers, we should argue during this parliament and at the next election that it not good for one party to have long periods of unfettered power.

We want to make government genuinely accountable, to make it win arguments as well as parliamentary votes and to subject it to the rigours of real debate. This might, for example, mean co-operating with a minority Labour government, rather than entering a coalition.

There are now about 10 seats that the Liberal Democrats could hope to gain from Labour at the next election. There are a good few more where we have established a strong second place or where we have the potential to build on local government success.

It may not be enough to let us destroy Labour's majority single handed, but we are in a position to make real inroads. To do all we can to offer a serious electoral challenge to Labour from a progressive direction, is not simply a matter of tribal warfare on the left. It is a way of bringing about better, more liberal and more accountable progressive government. The alternative is that the Liberal Democrats will not be an opposition with real teeth but a party of paper tigers.

ROPER TRICK

Dear Liberator

Your Radical Bulletin piece about John Roper's accession to the post of chief whip in the Lords rightly noted that there was some disquiet about the lack of democracy in the way he was appointed (Liberator 275).

However it is worth recording that since becoming chief whip John has impressed by his open and inclusive way of working.

One small victory for group democracy was his insistence that the process of election of Lords reps to the Federal Executive, Federal Policy Committee and the Parliamentary Office of the Liberal Democrats took place in a proper manner with a call for nominations and provision for a secret ballot.

In the past, and probably contrary to the party constitution, these places seem to have been filled by appointment by the powers that be!

As it happened all three positions were filled unopposed, but the system and the principle are now entrenched.

*Tony Greaves
House of Lords*

BED OF NAILS

Dear Liberator

Simon Titley's analysis of the election struck the nail, or a good many nails, on the head (Liberator 275).

On tax, you say that the UK overall tax is 40 per cent of GDP.

I suggest it is nearer to the continental level of 50 per cent already, because of the hidden tax of national insurance. Anyone with a payslip knows this is a deduction.

The Liberal Democrat policy of a 1p rise in income tax amounts to £2.8 million. This is pathetic in relation to either the education or the National Health Service budgets. How many weeks would it cover?

Presumably those who advance the 1p rise are knaves (in the leadership) or fools (in the rank and file).

*Professor John Vincent
University of Bristol*

LETTERS

FREE FOR WHO?

Dear Liberator

As usual, Tony Beamish is right in what he says in his article What Next For the Land (Liberator 275). Agriculture is not just another industry.

But how can he write that article, in a magazine addressed to "radical liberals", without mentioning that the main obstacle to treating agriculture with the respect it deserves is the Liberal doctrine of free trade, a politicians' con-trick to buy votes from the urban masses at the expense of the growers of food?

*Tim Beaumont
Green Party
House of Lords*

This letter also stated: "As I understand the situation, the Federal Executive had concerns about bringing forward a detailed report on the approach to and methodology for fighting the next European elections so far in advance of a campaign which will not take place until 2004, and about diverting valuable time and resources away from preparations for the general election.

"It was therefore decided to ask the Campaigns and Communications Committee to set up a group to comply with the terms of the 1999 conference motion after the general election, and to report no later than six months thereafter."

*Lawrence Fullick
Bournemouth*

GONE UNANSWERED

Dear Liberator

I note Duncan Brack's response (Liberator 274) to your item on Canterbury local party's question on the European elections at the September 2000 federal conference.

There were three questions on those elections, from Canterbury, Mole Valley and Bournemouth local parties. Individual written replies, to be published in the conference report, were promised.

On receiving the report, which did not contain answers to those questions, I wrote, as the Bournemouth questioner and the then chair of the Liberal Democrat European Group, immediately to Lord Dholakia, party president, pointing out the apparent forgetting of those three questions.

After four weeks I received a holding reply from Hugh Rickard, the party's chief executive, and after two months a reply indicating that the original questions could not be located.

SATISFIED CUSTOMER

Dear Liberator,

I want to congratulate you all on Liberators 275. Every article to the point.

It was good to know how Chesterfield was won, that our relationship with the gay and lesbian community is improving, how we find New Labour as being as hostile to local democracy as Thatcher was, and how the population does not get heated about politics when it perceives the big parties converging.

I was very heartened by the article about Bosnia, not least because of the declining interest in overseas affairs of the party. And I found the article on farming interesting, but veering rather too close to nature mysticism (which used to be the attitude of many pro-Fascists like Henry Williamson).

And congratulations on the excellent attack on OMOV by Tony Greaves.

I note a suggestion in the Liberal Democrats' "Have your say..." questionnaire that "The Party's Policy Unit staff should consult with regional conferences and regional party committees over policy making" with boxes to be ticked. Would this apply where cannabis is concerned?

*Bruce Ritchie
Kensington and Chelsea*

IDENTITY CRISIS

Dear Liberator

The comments by Simon Titley in *Liberator* 275 about residents not relating to their community were worrying but true.

Not only does this trend bring into question the validity of community politics-style campaigning, but for those of us who cut our teeth on community politics and believe in the underlying analysis and the politics of transferring power to communities it is a bleak message.

It is a worrying message for anyone who believes that vibrant communities are a power for good.

There is also a chord struck in the modernising agenda of local government, as a sop to councillors excluded from the central power elite in councils, the government claims that the agenda will enable councillors to better represent their communities.

I have yet to see any explanation of how this is meant to happen. If one looks at a councillor's role it is easy to see how he or she represents individuals or particular groups but there are often no groups who are geographically representative of a ward or part of a ward.

The conundrum then is how does a councillor know what the views of his or her ward are. I think there is a need for councillors to develop strategies to encourage groupings and identities based on geographical areas and for councils to support these strategies even, if necessary, financially.

The opponents of PR often argue that electoral boundaries represent areas of shared interest, not an argument I share, but perhaps we have to look at the more enlightened nineteenth century

nationalists who set out to build national identities, we need to apply their ideas at a micro-level.

The development of this is probably serial: from area awareness, through identification with the area to investment of personal resource in the area at which point devolution of power is a practical possibility.

The practicalities are problematical. Most case studies are based on community re-generation projects where the community was economically disadvantaged, how do you transfer ideas to prosperous dormitory areas?

One possible channel is leisure facilities, whether this would be in encouraging area based sports clubs or conservation type groups.

The particular needs of the councillor are that the group should identify and articulate its vision for the area; setting up a social group that goes no further is a political chocolate teapot.

If we look at the bigger picture the same points are true, many of the Parliamentary constituencies have no common identity and if we are serious about regional government how do we start building identities there?

For community politics to flourish the battle cry must be: identity, identity, identity.

*Tony Bevis
Horsham*

EXPLOITING RACE FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

Dear Liberator

In a curious way the Liberal Party is playing a role vis-à-vis the Liberal Democrats rather analogous to that being played by Roy Hattersley towards new Labour.

What rather worries us is the "closed shop" nature of the three parties, which centres politics virtually entirely on Westminster, in which short-termism replaces intellectual debate, and public apathy and cynicism is not particularly important as long as "my party" is progressing.

The press, almost without exception, is equally bound up in this charade and each "side" happily feeds off the other. As Hattersley finds, and as we find, our interlocutors on the inside don't understand what we are trying to say and are genuinely hurt to be

accused of being - corporately and politically - self-seeking and even insensitive. Most have apparently lost the ability to see themselves as from outside the system.

A recent example was the exasperating and futile response to the BNP phenomenon and the recent racial "troubles" in some northern towns. Believing that there is some easy "formula" to which the progressive side of the political divide can assent and which will resolve the problem is typical of today's politics. The situation is much more serious than that.

The Commission for Racial Equality's infamous election pledge was infantile beyond words. Of course the race issue should be exploited electorally.

Every Liberal - and liberal - should be raising the issue and using every ounce of historical evidence and intellectual rigour to look at the colonial record, the impossibility of defining "race", the nonsense of frontiers, the benefits of mobility as a good aspect of globalisation, the cynical exploitation of the developing world by buying its health professionals to work in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, the application of Tebbit's "on your bike" dictum to economic migration, the joys of a mixed community, the vivid linguistic parallels with 1930s Germany and Italy, and the frightening scenario that will inexorably follow if we continue along the present path - with reference to the Middle East and Northern Ireland.

And what did we get instead? Candidates were forbidden to speak at the result declaration in Oldham and the BNP candidates there able to use the simplistic picture of being gagged!

Liberals believe that politics is about process not about economic determinism. "Enabling people to take and use power". At the general election, where fewer people voted than ever before, where was the debate about involvement in the political processes?

It was all about who would spend how much money on what when the power was handed over to the party that won and specifically its leader, the prince. The Liberal Democrats honesty in stating that more spend means more taxes was rewarded. It was radical but it wasn't particularly Liberal. It may

have been a good ploy to appeal to disenchanted old Labour keen on public spending but it did not advance the public's understanding of Liberalism.

We will still campaign for Liberal ideas and values. We are not holier than thou purists and we do look forward to a re-uniting of the Liberal family. We have demonstrated we are willing to work with others for electoral purposes where we are free to continue as Liberals.

*Rob Wheway & Michael
Meadowcroft
The Liberal Party*

LET'S BE PICKY

Dear Liberator

I've heard a lot of people in the Liberal Democrats talk about encouraging pro-European Tories to defect to us if Ken Clarke loses the Tory Leadership.

That's all very well, but sometimes we concentrate too much on Europe as the only issue that matters. Merely being in favour of the Euro doesn't make someone a Liberal; equally, being opposed to the Euro may not necessarily mean someone doesn't share many other beliefs in common with us.

With both Duncan Smith and Clarke as fond of the state bossing people about as each other, with both having a grim record on opposing gay equality and a Thatcherite record on public services, there's ground for us to make whichever wins.

In particular, both have rejected the more liberal, inclusive Conservatism that Portillo was pitching for. Whoever wins, our biggest opportunity for converts may be from libertarian Tories alienated by an inevitably authoritarian victor.

*Alex Wilcock
Vice-chair, Liberal Democrat
Federal Policy Committee*

HAVE A GO

Dear Liberator

Liberal Democrats do "potty things" sometimes – the latest is to hold the Liberal Summer School in November! There is, however, a good excuse as the date of the General Election was so uncertain and it could not clash with Conference.

This year's School, which is organised in conjunction with The Centre for Reform is in Guildford, quite coincidentally one of the Liberal Democrat gains at the election, and is on Saturday, 3 November, starting at 10.30 a.m. with a carry over on the Sunday for those who wish. Its theme is "Funding Society: Can Taxation be Fair and Popular?" The Committee, headed by Lord Dahrendorf and Ann Moore, have lined up impressive speakers: Charles Kennedy MP, Ed Davey MP, Chris Huhne MEP, the former Director General of the CBI (Adair Turner) and the Executive Director of Friends of the Earth (Charles Secrett). It will take place at the Post House Hotel, where you can stay if you wish, but it's not free!

For more details and enrolment, contact the Centre for Reform, Dean Bradley House, 52 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AM (Tel: 020 7222 5121; Fax: 020 7222 5185)

If you want to try for an open bursary – worth £100 – apply to Richard Moore, Bankside, Caldecott Hill, Battle, East Sussex TN33 0JS, telling him briefly why you want to attend, your political experience and if you have been to a Summer School before. In the past, the number of bursaries available has often exceeded the number applied for so *Liberator* readers stand a good chance! Why not have a go this year?

*Tom Dale
Liberal Summer School*

BRIDGE THAT GAP

Dear Liberator,

One obstacle to the promotion of Liberalism in Britain is the split between two Liberal Parties. The Liberal Democrats are the major Liberal Party. In the 13 years since the Liberal Democrats were formed the growth of Liberal activity in some areas has been hindered by the division between the Liberal Democrats and the re-launched Liberal Party. This is now confined to maybe half a dozen areas but in times when the tolerance and pluralism of Liberalism is desperately needed in British politics this division only helps extremists gain more ground.

On any objective measure there is very little substantive difference between the policies of the Liberal Party and the politics of the Liberal Democrats. In many cases the continued split is due to local personality clashes from a dozen years ago and bitter local hostility on each side which has continued over the years. This limits the ability of local agreement to resolve the split.

Therefore the initiative should be taken at a national level. This writer has consistently argued that Liberals should be united. Just after a General Election is the right time to raise this issue. The Liberal Democrats nationally should formally approach the Liberal Party to arrange talks, with no pre-conditions - to end the split between the two Parties. To this end, it is noticeable that "Liberator" has more members on Liberal Democrat Federal committees than ever before. Those members, if re-elected, should collectively use their influence to get the idea of a formal dialogue put forward seriously within the Party.

*Kiron Reid
Liverpool*

Monetary Policy in the Euro Area: Strategy and Decision-Making at the European Central Bank

Otmar Issing, Vitor Gaspar, Ignazio

Angeloni, Oreste Tristani

Cambridge University Press 2001 199 pp
£15.95

As the United Kingdom approaches decision time on the euro with trepidation, the role of the European Central Bank needs careful examination. This book from some of Frankfurt's leading insiders is a most helpful guide. It sets out in detail the strategy of the ECB, and explains the Bank's emphasis on price stability in the context of what monetary policy can and cannot do. The authors are insistent on the novelty of the situation in which the ECB finds itself, although they rightly argue that market analysts should try harder to appreciate the whole - and mostly political - history of Economic and Monetary Union before they can hope to speculate accurately on what happens next.

Contemporary historians should get around to the euro as soon as possible, and this book will be seminal. There is a refreshing frankness about what the directors of the ECB think they're up to. The authors admit to 'a particularly high level of uncertainty in the way the single monetary policy affects the economy', and take a studied pride in the evolutionary nature of their jobs. Clearly stung by the criticism they have encountered from mainly Anglo-Saxon economists, they assert their willingness to achieve a higher level of accountability for their actions and decisions as well as a greater degree of transparency for their arguments. But they reject the demand of the European Parliament for the publication of how individual members of the Executive Board have voted on the grounds that supranational institutions like the ECB need a special coating of protection from accusations of national or commercial bias. Building the new consensus about the eurozone's single interest rate needs spontaneity and not pre-cooked deals. Indeed, perhaps it

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is only such a mature Old Lady as we have in Threadneedle Street that can afford the full exposure of the UK Monetary Policy Committee.

While the European Central Bank needs time to build its track record, however, it is reassuring to read such a generally unequivocal endorsement of the birth of the euro. The book's analysis finds no greater economic imbalances within the eurozone than those that already exist within the larger member states. While the ECB holds fast to the view that monetary union acts as a stimulus for deeper European integration in terms of capital, services and goods, those in charge at Frankfurt have not lost their heads. They quote with approval the sober judgement of David Hume that currency transition is merely akin to changing 'the colour of the metal'.

*Andrew Duff
Liberal Democrat MEP
for the East of England*

The Hitler of History: Hitler's biographers on trial

John Lukacs
Weidenfeld and
Nicholson 2000 £25

Lukacs has analysed the numerous biographical accounts of Hitler in an attempt to provide a true picture. The author makes meticulous distinctions between the meaning of superficially similar sounding words such as 'milestone' and 'turning point', explaining that events in Munich in 1919 proved to be both for Hitler.

He also makes a clear distinction between nationalism and patriotism. Lukacs describes Hitler as an extreme nationalist, but shows Nazi Germany often preferred to

work with pro-German government in occupied countries than with local Nazis.

Lukacs acknowledges the dearth of documentary evidence for Hitler's direct involvement in the formulation of the holocaust, but suggests that the Nazis were more adept at covering their tracks than had been earlier dictatorships.

He regards Hitler's anti-Semitism as being considerably stronger than his racism.

Lukacs considers whether the Hitler era is a chapter or an episode in German history, suggesting that it represents an extraordinary discontinuity without precedent, unlike the Stalin era in Russia.

Towards the end of the book, the apologists and rehabilitators are considered. The more extreme ones are dismissed as their writings are aimed at limited audiences and are too sectarian to be accurate evaluations.

In previous works, Lukacs has rejected revisionist theories by suggesting that the choice for Europe lay between domination by Germany or eastern Europe dominated by communism.

Hitler's place in history according to the author lies in a triangle of forces in which the three corners are democracy, communism and radical nationalism.

Although not a biography in itself the book provides a fairly holistic picture of one of the most influential people of the last century.

What is frightening is that he shows that Hitler was for a considerable period a popular dictator, and that for a while it was 'springtime for Hitler' in Germany.

Andrew Hudson

**The Paris Cookbook by
Patricia Wells
Kyle Cathie 2001
£19.99**

A good cookbook can be compared to a book of spells. You look for recipes that will dazzle and amaze your friends, while not calling for techniques, ingredients, or even equipment beyond your capacity or that of your cupboard.

To the casual reader paging through Patricia Well's new Paris Cookbook, the list of ingredients required for some of the recipes is intimidating, to say the least: how often do you pick up caviar, foie gras and truffles at your neighbourhood supermarket?

Yet here are rich resources for the average cook from the city that remains, in Well's words, "at the cutting edge of modern cuisine."

Wells has a formidable background in the appreciation and creation of good food. She has managed to charm recipes from the chefs of some of the legendary restaurants.

Some of the recipes included are Well's own creations. Her long residence in France and research in restaurant kitchens has given her a familiarity with procedures that has led to her own experiments and new recipes, here for us to enjoy. Some are those confided to her by Parisians: a taxi driver began by boasting about his wife's secret recipe for mussel, and ended up sharing it with Wells.

Wells has confided her favourite sources for fish, her favourite wine shop, and the address of one of the city's finest chocolate makers

"Nobody has ever been able to find out why the English regard a glass of wine added to a soup or stew as a reckless foreign extravagance and at the same time spend pounds on bottled sauces, gravy powders, soup cubes, ketchups and artificial flavourings." commented Elizabeth David in French Country Cooking. If your wine cellar is low, or possibly non-existent, Wells supplies you with recipes that won't make any exorbitant demands.

The Paris Cookbook is tempting for many reasons: good, standard formulas from Well's own kitchen, helpful trucs - suggestions about useful techniques - and pairings of ingredients not often used together.

Christine Graf

Christine Graf is the author of the Cafés of Paris, published by the Interlink Publishing Inc. & Constable in the UK. She and her husband, Dennis, are currently finishing it's sequel, Paris by Bistro

**Dinner of Herbs
Carla Grissmann
Arcadia 2001, £10.99**

**House of Windows
Adina Hofman
Arcadia 2001, £11.99**

Much of the appeal of the Middle East lies in its exoticism, not necessarily in the rather negative form portrayed by Edward Said in his writings on orientalism. And at a time when so much of the news coming out of the region is soul-destroying, it's a joy to be able to recommend two marvellous books that offer valuable insights into some of region's peoples. Carla Grissmann's portrait of a remote Anatolian village in the 1960s tells us of a Turkey that is rapidly disappearing. But it is the nature of the human relations that comes over so strongly in the book, at times in ways that brings tears to the eyes, giving it an almost timeless quality. Grissmann, an American single woman from what in the old days was called a broken home, admirably finds the right level for her own participation in the story, without being the central feature. Truly haunting in parts.

Adina Hoffman is also American, and settled in Israel, where she is the film critic for the *Jerusalem Post*.

She and her husband chose to live in Musrara, a district of magnificent old houses, now mainly divided into tenements, right up against the line between West and East Jerusalem. Prior to 1947, these were Arab homes, but now the inhabitants are largely poor Moroccan Jews - though a degree of gentrification is taking place.

Hoffman is viewed with deep suspicion by many of her neighbours at first, but gradually wins a form of acceptance, just as Grissmann did in Turkey. But increasingly, she wonders about the people who used to live there: Arab families who were dispossessed. She

speculates about the people whose home she now occupies, though she is presumably safe from an unexpected visit from the former inhabitants, as few Palestinian refugees these days have the right to visit Jerusalem.

This is perhaps as well for her. A Palestinian friend of mine who did manage to go to look at the house his grandfather had abandoned in 1947 rang the buzzer and told the voice that came over the intercom that his family used to live there. 'Used to,' the voice replied. 'Now fuck off.'

Jonathan Fryer

**Blue Peter Ocean
Watch by Martyn
Bramwell
Blue Peter Food Watch
by Martyn Bramwell
Blue Peter Animal
Watch by Roger Few
Dorling Kindersley,
2001, £7.99 each**

On today's programme we're going to save the planet, here's an eco-friendly Liberal democracy I made... well you've got to start somewhere haven't you... and as Steve Hocking (somewhat optimistically) puts it kiddies 'You have the power to change the attitudes of the adults around you'.

Bright, attractive, diverse, facts, opinions, things to do...

Stewart Rayment

**Left Book Club
Anthology
edited by Paul Laity**

Gollancz, 2001 £20.00.

Alas this is to be the last title under the Gollancz imprint. Left Book Club aside, Gollancz was one of the great science fiction publishers, and of course brought us Dorothy L. Sayers. The Left Book Club was probably the most successful propagandist of its kind in the 1930's. It's Liberal imitator only ran to three titles, I believe. But polemics that they are, only Orwell's "Road to Wigan Pier", lives on. Second hand bookshops up and down the country are littered with their titles

I have never been tempted to read them, even Stephen Spender's

“Forward from Liberalism”. Not that I could not grasp the concept, it just seemed improbable in a doctrinaire socialist context. Laity’s selection enables me to make amends, and at least justify “why not”. Polemical works are of their time and unless one has some (usually academic) reason for reading them, they can be a chore. Even Spender eventually saw through the Communist lies (the scales still cover Laity’s eyes). I suppose Liberalism did seem doomed in the 1930’s, but the answer is that it was even more necessary. Spender did not have a full grasp of Laissez Faire, he mistakes capitalism, an economic doctrine, for Liberalism, a political doctrine. Like so many people in the street, he appears to have no grasp of what politics really is, a method of resolution of conflicts. Spender attributes all sorts of other ends to politics, which it may achieve or contribute to this, but are not politics per se. He says that, during the Great War, the English Liberal coalition government set up a dictatorship, which served as a precedent for Hitler and Mussolini. Total war circumstances of the First World War led to command economy, broadly on a socialist model, but the measures were short term and regulated with an extended democratic process in which organised labour were involved. It didn’t always go well, but it was finite. Many regretted the de-nationalisation of the mines after the war. Although this showed how a planned economy might work, Mussolini took his direct inspiration from Lenin and Hitler from both of them. Communist dictatorship, both we, and Spender have seen, was not short term, and it ultimately failed because of its inherent weaknesses. Spender sensed the imminence of war, he was not alone, many Liberals did too. The polemical literature of the 1930’s is full of this and it would be interesting to see an analysis of how the determination of what Hobhouse later called “the left and right wing Hegelians’ contribution to the inevitability of war”.

Stewart Rayment

Liberal International Relations and Appeasement **by Richard S Grayson** **Frank Cass, 2001** **£45.00 hbk** **£18.50 pbk**

A close friend and considerable influence on my Liberalism was the late Norman Smith. He had been in Vienna at the time of Anschluss, working for what is now Unilever, he had read the writing on the wall and on return to Britain, joined The Territorial Army. He was not alone amongst Liberals of his day.

Studies of the 1920’s and 30’s are often frustrating - one knows that the conferences from San Remo to Locarno effectively came to nothing. Even the Washington Conference - a rare instance of power (UK, USA & Japan) agreeing to limit their capital ships in the Pacific, was flawed by inadequate anticipation of changing technology - notably the aircraft carrier.

The period is also fraught with myths - it is generally regarded that the Liberals were (in the main) anti-appeasement towards the end, but Lloyd George’s delusion over Hitler is frequently brought up by the Trots as if his views were party policies.

Grayson’s study sets these things straight, whilst managing to demonstrate that radical Liberal thought was ahead on international relations throughout the period. Starting with Keynes’ *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Liberals recognised the short comings of the Treaty of Versailles. The League of Nations is the manifestation of the new Liberal world-view, and they are amongst its strongest advocates in Britain, also arguing for German, Russian and American membership. The inter-dependency of nations is the keyword in this and it is linked to the cause of free trade. As the League faltered, alliances are recognised as the alternative inter-dependent structure, though hope still held out of bringing Germany and Italy in line (less said of Japan). Ultimately Archie Sinclair will argue the need to confront the dictators, and even defend that Liberal bugbear, conscription!

There are notable exceptions - Lloyd George cannot be consistently regarded as a mainstream Liberal

throughout much of the period, and Samuel and Lord Lothian, but Grayson demonstrates a consistency of approach between think tanks, party assemblies, parliamentary and grass roots activity - notably the Young Liberal debating society, the 8.30 Club. How many of us give a thought to archiving current material? Send you old minute books to your local history library or county records office - you can always restrict access if need be.

Even today, even the Liberal Democrats are broadly internationalist. One interesting aside on the book is an answer to the question “How we got to where we are now”. Walter Layton supplies an answer. Before the First World War, Liberals broadly subscribed to the sovereignty of nations. Inter-dependence was implicit in Free Trade, but became explicit as a result of that war and its aftermath. Today internationalism has become globalisation - however the Liberal’s route to this is inter-national, thus retaining scope for local autonomy of action within inter-dependency. There is a radical agenda here, in the control of globalisation through he rule of law and democratic channels. Riots in Seattle, London and Genoa, be they provoked for whatever reason, show that somewhere the message has not been put across. Internationalism has possibly played a significant role in the saving of Liberalism. How many of us were attracted in the 1960’s by the Liberal Party’s stance on South Africa? Are either the Liberal Party or the Liberal Democrats up to carrying the banner forward?

Stewart Rayment

Monday

Last time my diary appeared – just between ourselves, gentle reader, don't you think it should come out a little more often? – I invited my loyal readers to contact me by the electric email at bonkers.hall@btinternet.com. This morning brings the first such communication. A Mr N.A. from the County Borough of Southport, on behalf of a local resident, asks about the correct dress to wear for an introduction ceremony to the House of Lords. His fellow Southportian favours “a little off-the-shoulder diamante number”, whereas the aforementioned N.A. has been told that a dead animal (namely a stoat) is de rigueur. But how, he asks, does one find a stoat?

I was faced with just this problem in the 1940s when a friend wished to take his seat but did not have a thing to wear. As any country lad knows, stoats cannot be shot or trapped but must be charmed, so I invited the most charming fellow I knew – David Niven – for an afternoon at Braunton Burrows in North Devon. He soon gathered about him a rapt audience of a dozen stoats, which I quickly swept up in a sack and took to my friend's outfitters. The coast around Southport is not so very different, give or take the odd flock of wheways or hamwees, and I am sure a similar approach will bear rich dividends.

Tuesday

To a castle in the surprisingly mountainous region between Oxford and Abingdon to visit Evan Harris. The approach to this fastness proves a long climb and the local peasantry surly and uncommunicative. When the drawbridge is lowered, I am greeted by a chap with a bolt through his neck. He says: “The Herr Doctor is in his laboratory.” “You mean he is otherwise engaged?” I return, but the fellow does not smile. When I find Harris he is surrounded by test tubes, Bunsen burners and bubbling retorts. “Zis von is interesting, it has two heads,” he says, pointing to a pink blob growing on agar jelly. Already I am feeling a little queasy, and when I come across what appears to be a cross between a duck and a rabbit, I make my excuses and leave. As a genetically modified tomato remarked to me the other day, you can take this science business too far.

Wednesday

I spend the morning in the grounds of the Hall, practising the speech I intend to give in the pornography debate at Bournemouth. Many years ago I had an amphitheatre constructed where plays can be performed and where I can regale my tenants with extracts from my published memoirs. These latter events are always popular, particularly when rents are about to fall due. Today I choose to perform without an audience, and my address begins as follows: “Fellow Liberals, have you seen this? And this? And, er, these? Oh dear, I am sorry, this one appears to be the wrong way up. Or perhaps not. Be that as it may, I was able to obtain these from the moving Interweb in a matter of minutes. From, as it happens www.bonkers.hall.rut/big_ones. All major credit cards accepted.” I think that put it rather well, don't you?

Thursday

We gather by the shores of Rutland Water for our annual regatta. At first things go well: David Rendell wins the sculls and Ruttie, my old friend the Rutland Water Monster, puts up a new national

Lord Bonkers' Diary

record for the 220 yards breaststroke. Just as the over-70s water polo team is about to take to the water, a ship flying the skull-and-crossbones hoves into view. “It is Black Peter,” shrieks the crowd and they all run for home and bar their shutters. Yes, it is sad but true, since his defeat on the Isle of White Peter Brand has turned to piracy and made a rich living from shipping in the English Channel. Perhaps he bears a grudge for being ejected from Cowes? Now he has appeared nearer home. The Royal Rutland Naval Reserve soon puts to sea, but the fellow gets clean away.

Friday

Another e-mail reaches me, this time from Lord S. of A. (AKA Sir D. S.). He enquires as to the reasons for my longevity and suggests that the local water should be

bottled and sold. Funnily enough, this month has seen the launch of Bonkers Spa Mineral Water™. My advisers tell me that organic products are popular at the moment, which is felicitous as the water contains a high percentage of organic matter. All in all, it is a splendid product. Do not take just my word for it: only this morning a Well-Behaved Orphan said to me: “I would much rather have a glass of Bonkers Spa Mineral Water™ than Coca-Cola. (Will you let me out now please?)”

Saturday

People talk a lot about Mark Oaten, don't they? You hear them saying “Mark Oaten is a rising star” or “He's a rising star, that Mark Oaten” all the time. Complete strangers will approach one in Oakham High Street and spontaneously say: “Last night my wife and I compiled a list of rising stars, and we should like to take this opportunity, my lord, of assuring you that the name of Mark Oaten featured prominently upon it. No list of rising stars would be complete without that young man's presence, I can assure you. And our neighbours heartily concur.” Only this morning I noticed that the Prince of Wales (big ears, talks to sycamores, you know the fellow) is selling Oaten biscuits in an attempt to hitch his carriage to this particular rising star. More to the point, it is impossible to open the *Manchester Guardian* these days without a) a stiff measure of Auld Johnston and b) seeing the aforesaid Member for Winchester referred to as “a rising star” at least seven times. The only consolation is that the latest calculations from the Department of Hard Sums at the University of Rutland at Belvoir suggest that if Oaten's star rises any more he will collide with that rogue asteroid Öpik is always banging on about, and I am sure that saving the planet will do our poll ratings no end of good.

Sunday

To St Asquith's where the Revd Hughes takes as his text 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verses 1-4: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.” I think this a very good description of a Liberal Democrat Conference, don't you?

Lord Bonkers, who was Liberal Democrat MP for Rutland South-West, 1906-10 opened his diary to Jonathan Calder.
